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ICELAND At Home on Country Roads
USA New Kid on Tahoe's Slopes

THE GREAT OUTDOORS ISSUE

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA

AUGUST 2019

VOL. 8 ISSUE 2

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There's something about wrenching that last joule of energy out of your body to meet the Great Outdoors. Whether drinking the magic blues of Fiji, or shadowing penguins in New Zealand, among nature, labour is rewarding. Check with the skier gliding down egg-white slopes in Lake Tahoe's Diamond Peak Resort. Lensman **Zac Smith** has arrested this thrill.

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About us National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling that inspires travel. It is about family travel, about travel experiences, about discoveries, and insights. Our tagline is "Nobody Knows This World Better" and every story attempts to capture the essence of a place in a way that will urge readers to create their own memorable trips, and come back with their own amazing stories.

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A PEAK MOMENT TO CONSIDER

PEOPLE WERE BORN OF THIS EARTHLY GARDEN AND RETURNING TO ITS DELIGHTS IS A PRIMAL COMFORT

Part of the allure of a remote place is that the closer we get to it, the more we risk everything that made it precious. For years, Mount Everest inspired a sense of forbidden majesty, which was surmounted only by a few courageous adventurers. It helped that they were entertaining and we were content to immerse ourselves in the stories they wove from these monumental expeditions.

In 2019, life-changing experiences are more easily found. This is probably why, when a photo of tourists lined up outside Everest's summit, as though it were some check-in counter at an airport dispensing visas, was widely debated three months ago, the overwhelming emotion was deflated acceptance. No one in this day and age will be denied their Edmund Hillary moment.

In February, the *New York Times* ran a panicked headline about another solitary paradise, which had long been removed from sustained tourist interference—the Galápagos. "Going to the Galápagos Is Easier and Cheaper Than Ever. That Might Not Be a Good Thing," it warned. According to the article, "in 2017, 2,41,800 people visited the islands, up from 1,73,419 a decade earlier."

I am not highlighting these concerns as a spoilsport to anyone's dreams. Travellers have earned their right to be wherever they choose to be. Even more so, seeking out the elusive is neither new nor groundbreaking; people were born of this earthly garden and returning to its comforting delights is the most primal of escapes. But the irony of how long we have this profusion of wilderness has not been lost, especially while we look towards the outdoors for constant nourishment and inspiration.

Despite the arguments in favour or against these developments, *NGTI*'s August edition remains an ode to bona fide outdoor enthusiasts, a sincere testament to how faraway mountains, hidden islands, sweeping canyons continue to wield a magnetic pull over us. We have packed this issue with epic journeys: a 10-day road trip from Iceland's deep grey volcanic outback, a tropical joyride in Fiji, a playful encounter with wildlife in New Zealand and a first-time skier's tentative venture onto the slopes of Tahoe.

While enjoying these wonderful reads, try to think of that sagacious advice, often doled out when restlessness sneaks its dreary head—"Why not go outside? Get some fresh air?" The outdoors are great for us, this much has been proven. The question now is, can we be great for the outdoors too? ●

MARIDAV/SHUTTERSTOCK

OUR MISSION

National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling, inspiring readers to create their own journeys and return with amazing stories. Our distinctive yellow rectangle is a window into a world of unparalleled discovery.

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THE ITINERARY

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SOUNDS FROM THE CITIES

Always on the hunt for great live music, a writer maps out five British cities to catch the very best of homegrown U.K. talent

PHOTO COURTESY: GIULIA SPADAFORA/SOUL MEDIA

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QUINTESSENTIALLY QUITO

BOUTIQUE HOTELS AND NOVO-ANDEAN CUISINE ARE REACHING NEW HEIGHTS IN ECUADOR'S CAPITAL

The neo-Gothic spires of the Basílica del Voto Nacional tower over Quito's historic centre.

Wedged into the folds of the Andes, the world's second highest capital city (surpassed only by La Paz, Bolivia) contains the best preserved Spanish colonial core in the Americas. Despite this, travellers tend to overlook Quito as they make their way to the country's Pacific islands treasure, the Galápagos. But times are changing, and this city of two million is having a moment.

A burgeoning food scene, new boutique hotels, and a subway slated to open by year's end are encouraging visitors to explore this modern city with an ancient soul. "Quito is best understood as a collection of diverse neighbourhoods united under a volcano," says Jorge Vinueza, of Ecuadorian travel magazine Ñan. "These elements give it a unique energy that you only have to walk its streets to feel."

The city's UNESCO-designated centre is a rabbit hole of riches, but don't stop there. Take the *teleférico* to the top of the volcano. Stock up on textiles at the Artisanal Market. And on weekends, make like the Quiteños and head out of town.
—Norie Quintos

WILLIAM HEREFORD

KNOW IT

LA FLORESTA

A BARRIO WITH EVERYTHING ESSENTIAL: COFFEE, CULTURE, AND *CHISMES* (GOSSIP)

A hacienda estate until the early 1900s, this wildflowered area was one of the first neighbourhoods to emerge as the city expanded beyond its colonial borders between the World Wars. There are ornate Italianate mansions, low-slung early modernist houses, and high-rise apartment buildings. Artists and creatives began moving in some 20 years ago to give it the alternative, indie vibe it has today. "The first inhabitants of La Floresta brought with them the spirit of the historic centre, the *panaderías, cafeterías, lavanderías, sastrerías*—what we call *oficios*, or trades," says Vinueza. "Along with the more recent graffiti artists, musicians, and filmmakers, it's what gives this barrio its aliveness."

You don't need an elaborate plan. Just wander. You might decide to take in an art film at the pioneering **Ochoymedio theatre** or visit the offices of travel magazine ***The Ñan*** to purchase some authentic souvenirs the staff picked up during their sojourns throughout the country. Scoop up designer-made decor from **Libertina Tienda Galería** or sample superfoods like quinoa at **Vegano de Altura** and chocolate at **Hoja Verde.** Time for *un cafecito* (a black coffee)? Head to **Jervis** or **Botánica.** For a free guided stroll of the neighbourhood, check out **Quito Street Tours.**

Panama hats were born in Ecuador, where they're still woven by hand from toquilla straw.

ROBERT VAN DER HILST/GETTY IMAGES (HATS)

ROOM CHECK

- Trendy
- New
- Classic

LE PARC HOTEL

This sleek spot in New Quito's Benalcázar neighbourhood is walking distance to *crêperies*, cafés, and high-end shopping, as well as La Carolina, the city's version of Central Park, ideal for strolling and jogging. Well-appointed rooms feature mid-century modern furniture. *en.leparc.com.ec*

HOTEL MAMA CUCHARA

One of the city's newest boutique hotels grew out of an old house in the traditional working hood of La Loma Grande, near many of the sites in the historic centre. The house once harboured conspirators of the 1875 assassination of President Gabriel García Moreno. Now remodelers have reversed years of neglect and incorporated contemporary architecture to create a structure that evokes history without replicating it. Ecuadorian art adorns the rooms, and the restaurant's menu changes daily to highlight dishes from different provinces. *www.hotelmama-cuchara.com*

CASA GANGOTENA

With its prime location on Plaza de San Francisco—the heart of the historic quarter—this is undoubtedly the best address in the city. The former palace home of presidents and landowners was rebuilt in art nouveau style with art deco touches and eventually turned into a 31-room hotel. Don't miss the rooftop terrace for unfettered views of the old town. *www.casagangotena.com*

EAT IT

BUEN PROVECHO

FOUR WAYS TO EAT WELL, FROM STREET FOOD TO NOVO-ANDEAN

CAFÉ SOCIETY

1 Quiteños drink coffee all day long (and don't even think about ordering decaf). Try the cafeterías in Plaza Grande for people-watching. Serious coffee lovers should head to **Café Galletti Teatro** Bolívar, a family-run business that works with small fincas. To warm up on chilly nights, select one of three popular hot drinks: *canelazo* (made with sugar cane alcohol), *vino hervido* (mulled wine), or *chocolate con queso* (yes, with cheese). Sip them with dazzling city views at **Pim's Panecillo** or **Cafe Mosaico**.

GETTING CREATIVE

2 Long overshadowed by Lima, Quito's food scene is now making headway. Inventive chefs such as Alejandro Chamorro of **Nuema** are elevating Novo-Andean cuisine using products of coast, sierra, and jungle and reinterpreting indigenous and Spanish colonial traditions. At **Chulpi,** Carlos Saltos dishes out fresh takes on street food in a small house in the residential Las Casas neighbourhood. Don't miss the pairing menu at **Quitu,** chef Juan Sebastián Pérez's altar to Ecuadorian gastronomy.

STREET SCENE

3 For a dollar or two, you can feast like a king on Ecuador's *comida callejera*, or street food. Different areas have their specialties, so make like a local and nosh on *tripamishqui* (chewy but flavourful tripe) at outside stalls in **La Vicentina;** quesadillas (more of a pastry, nothing like the Mexican dish) in **San Juan;** candies from **Las Colaciones de la Cruz Verde** (try the so-called *caca de perro*—"dog poop"); and cookies made by the Carmelite nuns at the **Carmen Alto convent** in the historic centre.

HOT COCOA

4 Chocolate may well have originated in the Ecuadorian Amazon, but only in recent years have homegrown chocolate companies refined and developed the raw product. The most well known of them, **Pacari,** offers a two-hour minicourse in its historic downtown store that includes making and packaging your own organic truffles. Other chocolate houses worth visiting: **República del Cacao, Chez Tiff, Hoja Verde,** and fair-trade shop **Tianguez** (located under San Francisco church).

At Quitu, chef Juan Sebastián Pérez (left) **sweetens his tasting menu with chamomile ice cream.**

WILLIAM HEREFORD (CHEF, ICE CREAM); TAMER KOSELI (ILLUSTRATION)

SEE IT

THE HIGH POINTS

EXPLORE A CITY OF HISTORIC SPLENDOUR IN A REGION OF NATURAL WONDER

FINE ARTS

Quito has marvellous museums, including the **Museo de la Ciudad** and the **Museo Nacional del Banco Central,** but don't overlook these two under-the-radar gems: The **Casa del Alabado** showcases the surprising and sophisticated workmanship of pre-Columbian art within an elegant Spanish colonial house. And **Casa Museo Guayasamín** displays paintings and murals at the home of Ecuador's most famous 20th-century artist, Oswaldo Guayasamín.

FRESH AIR

Despite its notoriously fickle weather (keep a rain jacket in your bag), Quito often sees the sun. After you've acclimatized to the altitude, take the **teleférico** up the city's volcano, Rucu Pichincha, for a look around. Loved by locals, centrally located **Parque La Carolina** has running trails, a man-made lake, and the orchid-filled **Botanical Gardens**. On Sundays, rent a bike and cruise Quito north to south on roads closed to traffic for the weekly **Ciclopaseo.**

DIVINE SIGHTS

It could take weeks to see all of the city's churches. If there were a people's choice, it would be **San Francisco** church and plaza, its winged Virgin of Quito statue above the altar replicated to gigantic proportions on Panecillo Hill. But there's also the gleaming, gold-leaf-plated interior of **La Compañía,** built by the Jesuits in baroque style. If you don't fear heights, scale one of the towers of the **Basílica del Voto Nacional** for heavenly vistas.

OUT OF TOWN

All the volcanoes and lakes within a 96-kilometre radius encourage weekend jaunts. North of Quito is the world-famous **Otavalo** market; stay at the new Otavalo Hotel and arrange a guide for the textile and music workshops. South of Quito, adventurers can climb the majestic (and active) **Cotopaxi** volcano or take in the views from horseback at Hacienda El Porvenir. **Baños,** at the base of another volcano, Tungurahua, is known for its thermal springs.

An Ecuadorian cowboy, or *chagra,* from Hacienda El Porvenir rides by the Cotopaxi volcano.

WALK THE LINE

ECUADOR'S EQUATORIAL ENCOUNTERS

The French-led Condamine expedition famously mapped the line between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres just 22 kilometres north of Quito, and visiting the official site, La Mitad del Mundo, is a popular excursion. A massive monument and bright yellow stripe of demarcation make for cool snaps straddling the line. The problem is the 18th-century explorers were about 800 feet off. To get closer, you'll have to go to the nearby Intiñan solar museum, a hokey attraction with mock physics experiments. For the most accurate GPS readings and scientific explanations, head to Quitsato, near Cayambe, site of a large solar clock and the best place to appreciate the gravity of where you are standing.

WILLIAM HEREFORD

WHERE A SPY WAS BORN

IN THE HEART OF THE PORTUGUESE RIVIERA, ESTORIL WAS ONCE A HUB FOR ESPIONAGE, AND THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE FICTIONAL JAMES BOND BY AKANKSHA SINGH

An inspiration for the James Bond (bottom) **series, Hotel Palácio in Estoril was also a setting for the famous spy flick.**

There is something about the half-hour drive from Lisbon to Cascais. Perhaps it is the azure seaside and palm-lined roads of the Portuguese Riviera. Or perhaps it is the fact that I am en route to Hotel Palácio in Estoril, where World War II spies cooled their heels on neutral Portuguese soil and where, consequently, agents and double agents openly crossed paths.

I'm particularly interested in one agent, James Bond. Or rather, I am interested in his creator, Ian Fleming, a former member of the Naval Intelligence Division. Fleming created Bond after having stayed in Estoril in 1941. In fact, the casino in *Casino Royale* is none other than Casino Estoril, one of Europe's largest.

When I pull up to the hotel, with its grand 1930s facade—ivory and cream with wrought iron balconies—I recall the scene in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* where Bond, played by George Lazenby, arrives in his Aston Martin. I arrive via a comparatively less glamorous Uber, albeit, on an equally important mission: to have the famed martini in Bar Estoril, aptly nicknamed the "spy bar."

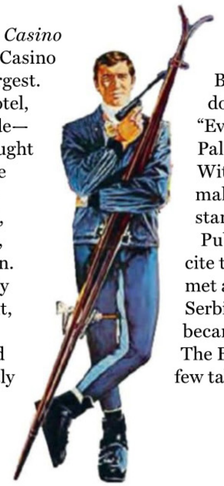
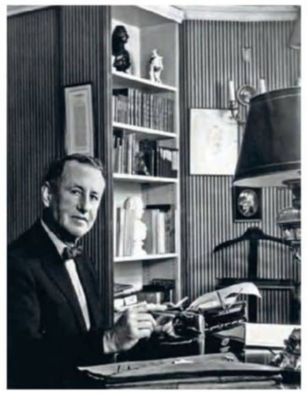


PHOTO COURTESY: HOTEL PALÁCIO (HOTEL FACADE, JAMES BOND)

In the 1969 movie, when Bond walks through the hotel doors, he says matter-of-factly, "Everything seems up to the Palácio's usual high standards." With its slick marble floors and mahogany decor, it's clear those standards are still maintained.

Published reports and the staff cite that while at the hotel, Fleming met a double agent for Britain and Serbia named Dušan Popov, who became the inspiration for Bond. The Bar Estoril is quiet today and a few tables are occupied. I take in the checkerboard floors and emerald and maroon-winged armchairs, imagining the two men making their acquaintance here. As I see a photo of Fleming's and Popov's guest registrations inside the menu, the picture becomes clearer.



A swanky holiday destination in the Portuguese Riviera, Estoril is popular among tourists for its casino, Praia do Tamariz beach (top right) **and shop-filled city centre** (top left)**; Monikered the "spy bar," Bar Estoril** (bottom right) **at the hotel was frequented by Ian Fleming** (bottom left)**, the creator of James Bond. Today, it houses the signature 007 martini.**

GIANCARLO LIGUORI/SHUTTERSTOCK (SHOPS); ALEXANDRE ROTENBERG/SHUTTERSTOCK (BEACH); AF ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/INDIAPICTURE (IAN FLEMING); PHOTO COURTESY: HOTEL PALÁCIO (BAR)

The bar looks onto a swimming pool: the one you see as Bond enters the hotel. Beyond it are manicured lawns, once trod upon by every exiled royal from France, Italy and Spain during the war.

When the waiter asks me what I want, I feel sheepish. Do I want to be another clichéd tourist, here only for the "007 martini?" (I desperately do.) I clear my throat, ask for it, and am commended for my choice. With Tanqueray gin, Stolichnaya vodka and Lilletvermouth, served in a long-stemmed glass with an olive, the first sip of the martini is fiery. Being more of an "extra dry gin martini" sort of person, I can't tell if I like it.

When the waiter enquires about my trip, I tell him that I've stopped by Estoril exclusively for this martini. I'm not the biggest Bond fan, I explain, but sharing space with Fleming, though a few decades too late, fascinates me. It's my *Midnight in Paris* moment.

"You know," he tells me, "this was Fleming's table."

I gaze at him narrowly. He's much too young to have been around for WWII.

There is, he explains, a bellman who has worked here for the last 60 years, and knows who sat where. The "bellman" is one José Viera: the bellboy from the 1969 flick who hands Bond the keys to room 516. Eighteen at the time of the movie, today, Viera is the hotel's head concierge.

This is not the best martini in Portugal, but by the time I'm on my second round, I can see why this whole atmosphere would have suited the likes of Fleming and Popov.

The seaside, with its casino, golf course, and eateries, offers respite from the modern world. The Riveria continues to modernise, with more buildings and backpackers. As does the country around it. Hotel Atlántico, favoured by the Central Powers, is now the InterContinental Cascais-Estoril. Sadly, the original structure gave way to a glass-and-concrete structure in 2007. With its old furniture donated to local charities, nothing is left of the original.

As I thank my waiter, he tells me that the next time I'm here, I must stay at the hotel: "I'll ask around about all the James Bond facts," he smiles.

"That'd be nice," I reply. "Maybe I'll write a story on it."

ESSENTIALS

Flights between India and Portugal have at least one layover at a Middle Eastern or European gateway. Cascais, a town close to Estoril is a 34 km/30 min drive from Lisbon. Affordable Uber services ply regularly between the two towns. A meal for two at Bar Estoril costs €60/₹4,600 and a glass of the signature martini costs €12.50/₹970 *(www.palacioestorilhotel.com)*.

RAINED OUT IN WAYANAD

EARLY MONSOONS PROD A WRITER TO DISCOVER THE PETROGLYPHS OF EDAKKAL CAVES AND STORIES OF THE REGION'S OLDEST TRIBES **TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUDHA PILLAI**

Adventure begins where your well-laid-out travel plans end. And mine lay crumpled at my feet, trampled upon by nature.

Monsoons had arrived a tad early in Wayanad. The leeches weren't prowling yet, and the mountains were dark and mysterious even mid-morning. The waterfalls were frothing and menacingly beautiful. The ground had already turned a slippery reddish-brown. In between showers, oil and grease built up on the tar roads hugging the boundaries of vast tea plantations and spice gardens. Yes, monsoons had checked in at Wayanad, and everything was glistening. Also, the popular spots were shut.

"Chembra Peak is closed for the monsoons," said Sajan Padikkera Suresh, my host at Camellia homestay. "So is Soochipara falls and Kuruvadweep island." They were top three on my list of things to see in Wayanad.

I sipped my second cup of coffee in the partially covered terrace of the two-storey homestay, a stout, pink building inside a coffee plantation overlooking Chembra Peak. The mountain, renowned for trekking, played peek-a-boo with low-hanging clouds.

"However, Edakkal is open," said Suresh. As three doors closed, another seemed to be opening.

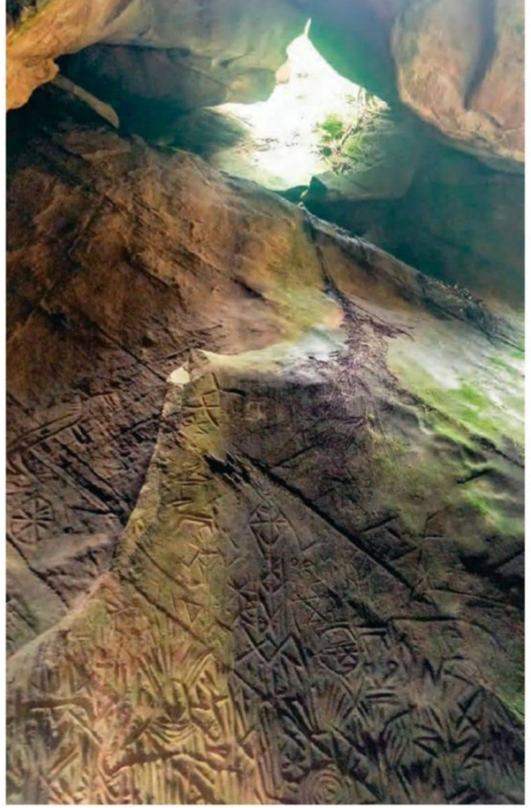
THE STONE IN BETWEEN

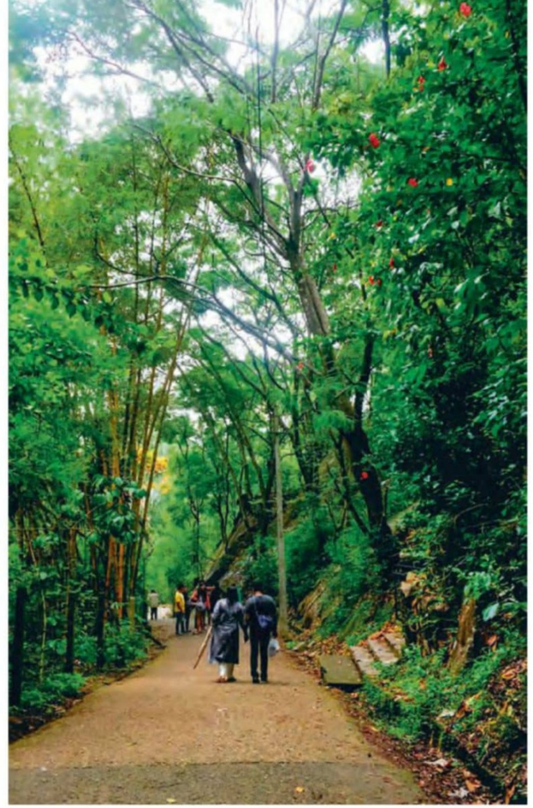
A 45-minute drive took me to Edakkal Caves, situated on the western slope of Ambukuthi Hills. The caves are 4,000 feet above sea level. That meant a roughly 30-minute walk up a steep pathway (at points I felt like a mountain goat on a 90-degree rock face) and climbing over 300 steps. It was like a stairway to heaven, and a pleasant climb—monsoon showers resulted in fewer tourists and ideal weather for the strenuous trek.

Edakkal comprises of an upper and lower cave. The lower cave is closed to the public since a rock fell to the ground after the 2018 floods in Kerala. "Its safety will be thoroughly studied before reopening," an employee informed me.

Edakkal means "the stone in between" in Malayalam. The cave was formed when a single colossal rock split into two, probably during an earthquake, and another rock got wedged between them. According to my guide, the caves are 30,000 years old.

Chembra Peak, adjoining the Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu, is visible from everywhere in Wayanad and is a popular trekking spot.





According to local legend, Edakkal Caves (left) **were formed when Luv and Kush, sons of Lord Rama, fired their arrows. While the caves offer no trace of them, the climb** (right) **is a picturesque one in the monsoon.**

About 96 feet long and 22 feet wide, the cave is not dark and dank as there is an opening in the roof, allowing in ample natural light.

Archaeologists believe the petroglyphs in the caves were etched between 4,000 and 1,000 B.C. The carvings are spread over 500 square feet, on the two walls of the cave. They include figures of humans, birds, animals, trees, numeric signs and so on. "Only 25 per cent of the etchings have been deciphered," my guide said. There are also inscriptions on both walls in ancient Tamil Brahmi script and Sanskrit, dated between the second and fifth centuries.

I was lost in the sophistication of this art from thousands of years ago, when the guide's voice pierced my reverie: "Come to this side, Madam. You should see this." He pointed to a narrow gap, as wide as my palm, between two rocks in a far corner of the cave. I could see the Phantom Rock on the distant horizon. The rock did resemble the fictional character.

After taking in the spectacular bird's-eye view of Wayanad from a landing at the upper cave, it was time to walk down—a tedious yet exhilarating descent.

WAYSIDE WONDERS

Closer to the foot of the mountain, shops line the pathway selling myriad items from coffee to homemade chocolate to eco-friendly footwear. My eyes zoomed in on the bamboo rice *payasam*. Until then, I hadn't heard of "bamboo rice."

Bamboo rice is harvested once in 40 years. Towards the end of their lifetimes, bamboo trees bloom and produce seeds that are brownish-pink in colour. In Wayanad, tribal communities go into the forest to harvest this nutrient-packed seed.

> **Time stands still in the jungles of Wayanad,** even as old ways of living are slowly wiped away

Bamboo rice is costlier than regular rice—anywhere between ₹150-200 for 500 grams. I picked up a little box of it and the recipe for bamboo rice payasam from a shopkeeper.

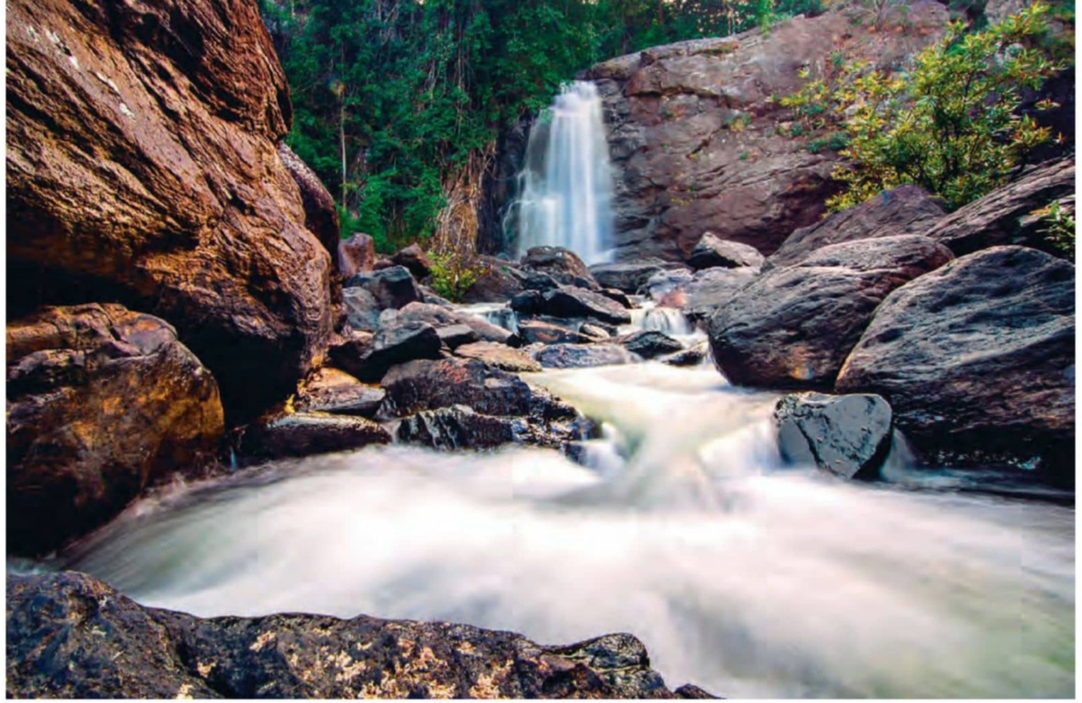
At the pathway's end was a shop inviting people to try archery, "for only ₹10." Outside was a poster of Govindan *aashan* (master), an expert archer and head of the Kurichiya tribe. I tried my hand, albeit with dismal results.

The travel gods can often present interesting choices. Govindan aashan was one. I wanted to meet him. The archery stall owner called the aashan's house to inform them about an eager traveller wanting to meet the maestro.

A HUNTER FROM THE FOREST COUNTRY

Forty minutes later, I was sitting in the verandah of Govindan's concrete house in Ambalavayal. Drinking copious amounts of *kattan chai* (black tea), I listened to the tales of the forest from the septuagenarian.

Wayanad is a land of forests that



The Soochipara (needle rock) waterfalls (top) **are a tourist magnet, but unfortunately shut in the rains; Bamboo rice payasam** (bottom) **is considered a delicacy in Wayanad.**

was earlier called Vana-nad, or "forest country". Wild animals abound in these jungles and until a few decades ago, members of numerous indigenous tribes lived in the forests. The Kurichiya tribe is especially renowned for its members' hunting skills, particularly using bows and arrows. "A good hunter can let fly three arrows within the span of the length of a bow, which is around five feet while running on the uneven forest ground," Govindan said. It was impossible to wrap my head around that kind of skill.

The master's training in the art of making bows and arrows and archery began when he was just four years old. "We never hunted for the sake of hunting," he said. "We hunted only small animals for food once or twice a week. You can't eat big animals, so why kill them?" Govindan is afraid that the archery, as he and his forefathers have practised it, would die with him—though he has passed on his skills to his granddaughter.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAIN

Wayanad is native to over 60 major tribes. Though most of them have been integrated into modern life, they still have strong ties to the forest. They live in colonies inside the forest or closer to the jungle. Just before dusk, I stand in one such colony of Kattunayakans, who speak a unique dialect—a mixture of Tamil, Kannada and others that I am unable to decipher.

Standing with me on a cliff in the shadow of the majestic Neelimala, Ayiappan, the head of the tribe in Vaduvanchal, points out landmarks in the horizon. I can see the Malabar region in the west, the Nilgiris in the east, the Mysore plateau in the north-east and the Ghats in the north-west stretching to Coorg. I feel like an eagle surveying the land from my clifftop.

Until recently, Ayiappan had to walk through the jungle to reach the colony. Now there is a steep, narrow concrete pathway—not conducive for cars though.

The Kattunayakans worship almost everything that comes from nature. But they repose their faith in the goddess, represented by a stone in a shrine up in the hills of Neelimala. "The forest and everything in it is our life, our family," Ayiappan says.

Time seems to have stood still in these parts of Wayanad. However, many old ways of living are slowly being wiped away as the guardians of the forests assimilate into mainstream society. People like Ayiappan are still striking a balance by not giving up on certain practices integral to their lives, mainly marriage and death rituals. He pointed to the graveyard of the tribe hidden behind trees. The tribe's burial rituals remind me of the Egyptian pyramids. They bury the body inside a chamber dug underground along with the deceased's favourite things.

It began to rain steadily. I watched Ayiappan walking confidently back into his world even as I moved towards mine in the opposite direction. Sheets of water poured down from the sky as the car made its way through silent tea estates, and empty roads.

"Tomorrow let us go meet Ramesh, the tribal artist from Trikaipetta," said Sajan Suresh. Ramesh documents the dying rituals and cultures of the tribals of Wayanad through his pen and ink artwork.

I nodded in agreement. Sometimes the best travel plans are the ones with no itineraries and lots of rain. ●

KAJIN/SHUTTERSTOCK (WATERFALL)

GORDAN RAMSAY'S TASTE OF TRAVEL

ONE CHEF, SIX DELICIOUS DESTINATIONS: TRAVEL TIPS FROM THE CULINARY ADVENTURER'S NEW NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SERIES

Food is the foundation," Gordon Ramsay says. "It gives rounded insight into the actual culture of a place." He should know, after taking deep dives into the food scenes of six destinations around the world for the new National Geographic television series *Gordon Ramsay: Uncharted*, making its premiere July 29, on *National Geographic Channel*.

The 52-year-old British-born chef, famed for his Michelin-starred restaurants and intense competition shows like *MasterChef*, traded tricked-out kitchens and TV studios for "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to explore and reconnect" with the source of ingredients. Since Ramsay believes in learning by doing, he followed the lead of locals on sometimes harrowing expeditions, such as perching precariously on a mountainside in Peru to harvest the specific cactus needed for a particular dish. The Ironman athlete admits he felt vulnerable at times. "It looks crazy," he says, "but it's what they do on a daily basis."

The people Ramsay met, and their resourcefulness and respect for ingredients, made a deep impression on him. What's his advice to travellers? "Stay off the high streets," he says. Be adventurous, and seek out what really defines the culture. Here he offers some takeaways and tips for each destination in the series.

—Brooke Sabin

Grape vines thrive on the Banks Peninsula of New Zealand's South Island.

ROBIN SMITH/GETTY IMAGES

NEW ZEALAND

"The hangi is my new favourite way to cook meat," says Ramsay. "Dig a hole, light a fire, bury the meat, and go enjoy a few hours relaxing." Methods for this traditional Māori way of cooking have been handed down for generations, and the hangi is still used to prepare meals on special occasions. Ramsay also marvels at how Māori cook with seaweed in inventive ways—and how they retain these techniques in their modern-day culture. Smoked eel, he says, is another best bite. And be sure to sample the sips. "New Zealand has some of the best local wines."

A CHEF TO WATCH
Matt Brock of Kika restaurant in Wanaka, known for seasonal, tapas-style dishes

ALASKA

One of Ramsay's most memorable moments came when he visited an indigenous Tlingit community. As he entered a family smokehouse, he saw that the 12-year-old daughter was "braiding with absolute, utter finesse" the 23-foot-long intestines of a seal so they could be smoked and later eaten. "You stop in time and just think, wow," he says. "It's how they will continue to survive across very dark, hard-core winters." For local fare requiring a less adventurous palate, he recommends Alaskan white salmon and gin from Juneau's Amalga Distillery, which has a lively tasting room. The owners forage many of the botanicals themselves. "A must try!"

A CHEF TO WATCH
Beau Schooler of In Bocca Al Lupo restaurant, serving handmade pastas and pizzas in Juneau

1

2

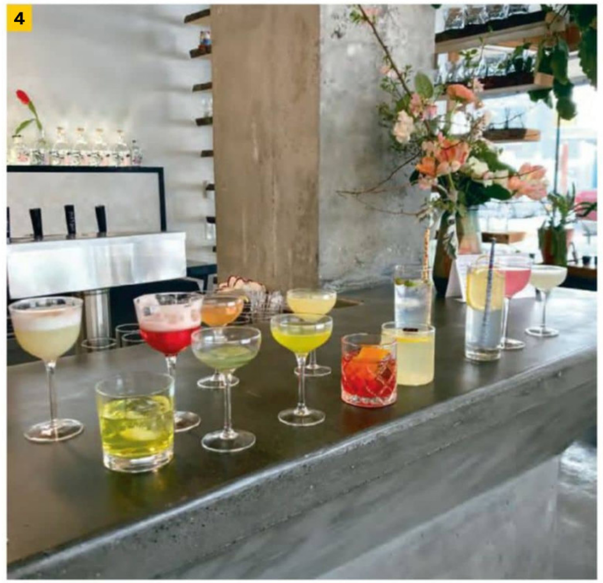
3

PERU

"High altitude is no joke," Ramsay says. Even the pisco sour, a brandy-based tipple that's considered Peru's national drink, packs a more potent punch in the lofty villages dotting the Sacred Valley. But his greatest discovery in the land of the Inca? "The amazing diversity in potatoes. Each one was unique and different, and they were incredible to cook and eat," he says. Indeed, it's estimated that 4,000 types of potatoes grow in Peru, ranging from the pale *papa blanca* to the jewel-toned *papa púrpura*. But not everything succulent is starchy. Alpaca jerky, says Ramsay, makes a salty, satisfying snack.

A CHEF TO WATCH
Juan Luis Martínezof Mérito, a restaurant in Lima that puts Venezuelan spins on Peruvian ingredients

GAETAN PENEC (DESSERT), BRENDAN SMITH (DRINK), EWEN BELL (RIVER)



MAURA SELENAK/ @AMALGA DISTILLERY (BAR), ALEC JACOBSON (SALAD)

LAOS

Before the Mekong River empties into the South China Sea, it flows through six nations, including Laos. On his first trip to the country, Ramsay learned that "the Mekong is the lifeblood of the community. It's not only where a lot of the food comes from, but it's how you get to any location." The river is so key, in fact, that its name in Lao can be translated as "mother water." Along the banks, find historic temples, lush jungles—and tempting refreshments. But "don't drink the moonshine unless it's in a mixed drink," warns Ramsay. Do try the roasted bananas, which he calls "simple, delicious, and the perfect treat."

A CHEF TO WATCH
Seng Luangrath, who's brought Laotian flavours to Washington, D.C., with her Thip Khao restaurant

MOROCCO

Think truffles, and you likely conjure up the forests of France or Italy. But these delicacies also grow in Morocco, says Ramsay, along with mushrooms such as morels, porcinis, and chanterelles. Head to cities' old quarters for produce and just about anything else. "The medina is full of diverse things," he says. "You can buy the most amazing olives and a vintage carpet all in one place." Don't forget to try Berber pizza, or *medfouna*, dough stuffed with meat, onions, and spices.

A CHEF TO WATCH
Meryem Cherkaoui, of Marrakech's Mes' Lalla restaurant, specialising in new takes on local flavours

HAWAII

The best way to start the day in this Pacific Ocean archipelago? "Banana bread," says Ramsay. "It's the perfect morning snack with local coffee." While the Big Island's Kona coffee claims the spotlight, the rich volcanic soil supports several varieties. After fully caffeinated outdoor adventures that might include scuba diving or lava hiking, pull over for a meal. "Roadside dining is some of the best food," Ramsay says. His pick is barbecued and basted *huli-huli* chicken, devoured right by the water.

A CHEF TO WATCH
Sheldon Simeon, of Maui's Lineage restaurant, dishing up his family favourites

Gordon Ramsay: Uncharted, *makes its Indian premiere on July 29, airing every Monday at 10 p.m. on* National Geographic Channel.

Additional reporting by **Jill K. Robinson**

Left to right: **1 An almond *pastilla* from Morocco's Mes'Lalla; 2 A mai tai at Lineage in Hawaii; 3 The Mekong in Laos; 4 Alaska's Amalga Distillery; 5 A salad at Peru's Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba.**

A BEAK FAT BIRDING DELIGHT

THERE ARE ENOUGH BIRDS IN COLOMBO'S WETLANDS TO WHIP OUT THOSE BINOCULARS

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN LOCKWOOD

Colombo sleeps in late on the weekend, resting after a night of revelry the city's many clubs and casinos afford. When I wake at dawn, the air is still sticky from the previous night's pre-monsoon showers. Venus still glows in the azure eastern horizon but all too soon the tropical sun will burn away the darkness. Such mornings are when Sri Lanka's renowned protected areas, the likes of Yala, Wilpattu and Sinharaja, beckon people like myself, people who are drawn to the island's biodiversity. Of them, a fair chunk comprises twitchers, or individuals who travel long distances in search of rare birds, and Sri Lanka is indeed a haven for them. There are 33 endemics species and a host of difficult-to-see others that make a birding holiday truly rewarding. What a few people also appreciate is that some of the best birding sites on the island are not in remote jungles but are hidden away in a series of urban wetlands, nestled amongst Colombo's dense neighbourhoods and commercial zones.

This spring morning, in a leafy suburb in Colombo, I am itching to go birdwatching and I am taking a counter-intuitive approach and heading, not away but, into the urban heart of the city. Gathering up my gear and rousing my teenage son Lenny from slumber, I set out in search of enigmatic water birds. Bitterns, uncommon winter visitors, have been recently sighted; three of them. They are our holy grail species. I have been trying in vain to photograph them in outer Colombo for the last few years but I have been rather frustrated with fleeting views and no decent photographs thus far.

Our destination today is the Urban Wetland Park in the densely populated suburb of Nugegoda. A few years ago this was a marshy, flood-prone site, derelict due to illegally dumped solid waste. Today it is one of several urban wetland parks with tree-lined walking trails juxtaposed amongst a congested conglomeration of small buildings, tight residences and commercial establishments. It is one of almost half a dozen designated areas that city planners have set aside as urban wetland parks.

***

The drive to the park is the most challenging part of the morning.

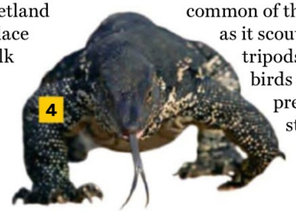
Colombo's older neighbourhoods and new high rise buildings are integrated with a series of protected wetlands that are biodiversity havens.

1 Ruddy-breasted crake at the Thalawathugoda Biodiversity Park; 2 The common kingfisher brings vivid colour to Colombo's wetlands and waterways; 3 & 4 At Nugegoda Wetland Park, a black bittern steps out of shadows while a water monitor lizard walks amongst joggers and birdwatchers.

Motorcycles weave in and around us. Buses stop in the middle of the road to deposit and pick up passengers. Flashy SUVs whizz past, disregarding speed limits. On the side of the road women sell *kola kenda*, a Sri Lankan herbal drink much sought-after by the many people out cycling and walking. Lenny has not yet picked up an appreciation but for me no early outing is complete without a tall glass of this green, garlic- and rice-infused nourishment.

I am thinking about black and cinnamon bitterns. The sulky and rare wetland birds have been reported from Nugegoda's wetland park by birders on the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka, a Facebook page I follow and occasionally contribute to. So far, I have hesitated to venture into the city for birdwatching—it seems antithetical to the whole idea of twitching. In fact, for the last few years I have been happily exploring the wetland parks near the Sri Jayewardenepura (Parliament) lake where I live and work. Diyasaru and Beddagana both have excellent trails with plenty of birds to see. Rosy starlings, blue-tailed bee-eaters and rarities such as the ruddy crake come in the winter. There are even saltwater crocodiles cruising the lake; the protective fencing line walkways and signs caution against croc attacks.

In Nugegoda, the wetland park started off as a place for city dwellers to walk and run in, and a 1.5-kilometre-long walkway stretches alongside a canal that exudes a rather whiffy grey water odour. The pathway wraps itself around several small islands of dense, marshy vegetation. We are early. It is only 6.30 a.m. and the parking lot is already packed. Inside, the broad, sandy walkway is getting crowded with early morning walkers dressed in shorts and leggings. For the most part they walk in small groups, engaged in conversations. Individual runners, wired into devices, criss-cross between these groups. Lenny and I are in khaki and camouflage garments, weighed down with large lenses and tripods. Nobody really stares but I see a few eyebrows rise, telling us we might be slightly out of place.



Almost immediately we start seeing interesting feathered creatures. At first it is the striated heron hunting by the water's edge a few metres from our path; not just one, but a handful of these rare birds are all well within our sight. On my past wetland visits I have seen and photographed it, but never have I had such a fine opportunity to appreciate the heron's details and behaviour. A yellow bittern, the most common of the genus, strikes a pose as it scouts for fish. We set up the tripods and start shooting. The birds seem unfazed by our presence amongst the steady stream of walkers. Nearby, there are green imperial pigeons nesting. Other birds include spot-billed pelicans, stork-billed kingfishers, night herons and purple herons. We hear and then successfully photograph the endemic crimson-fronted barbet feeding on a ficus tree. Enormous water monitors—scavengers of Sri Lanka—share the waterways and walking path with humans and other wildlife.

Moving through a lesser used link path, I spot a dark shape sitting motionless in a shadowy thicket. We have been in the park less than 20 minutes and here is the elusive black bittern, perched perfectly still on a branch just above the water. It is barely four metres away from my tripod legs when I get my first images. But it seems to sense my interest and, like a ghost, disappears into the woody zone across a murky moat. I wait in vain, but on this first visit I also learn to be content with just a glimpse. It will take several more visits before I can record it properly or photograph the even more reticent cinnamon bittern.

We head homeward with a sense of elation and an appetite for one of the famous chilly-spiked Sri Lankan breakfasts. By now it is mid-morning and the number of visitors has thinned. The joggers have been replaced by young couples occupying secluded seats in corners. They cuddle and giggle when we walk by. Outside, it's just another busy weekend day as traffic picks up and the hustle of the city goes on alongside this fine slice of the natural world.

ONE MAN WHO RULED THEM ALL

A VISIT TO A MUSEUM AND A SECRET PRINTING PRESS IN TBILISI OFFERS A HISTORY BUFF INSIGHT INTO THE LIFE OF RUSSIAN DICTATOR JOSEPH STALIN BY PRANJALI BHONDE PETHE

Stalin's railroad car (top), now parked in front of the Joseph Stalin Museum in Gori, came equipped with a bedroom, study, bathroom, kitchen and a meeting room; Of the many gifts on display in the museum, a vase (bottom) with the dictator's face embossed on it stands out.

Stalin was a Georgian, did you know?" asked my guide Eka, as she pulled out a picture of a young man—chiselled features, chestnut brown hair held back in a pompadour, and a checked scarf neatly tucked in his coat. Most in our motley group of eight, out exploring with Tbilisi Free Walking Tours, had thought he was Russian. That's all it took to plant the bug in my head. Over the next few days, as I roamed the Georgian capital—where medieval churches, cobbled streets, and vine-green verandahs abound—I also set myself on the Soviet politician's trail.

On an April morning, I arrived at Avlabari, a mazy suburb 15 minutes from the city centre by car. Giorgi Orjonikidze, my guide for the day, led me up to a nondescript building distinguished only by a painted hammer and sickle—the Soviet symbol of proletarian solidarity popularised during the Russian Revolution—on its wooden entrance. We were to be shown around J. Stalin's Underground Printing House Museum by caretaker Sergio Barisashvili. The middle-aged lady spoke only Georgian and Russian so Giorgi aided with English translations. She led me into a room recreated to resemble Stalin's office—a desk stacked with files, documents spelling out death warrants, an off-white rotary telephone and chairs flanked by Soviet flags. Stacks of vintage *Pravda*—a Russian broadsheet that served as the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—were strewn on the adjacent desk. What drew my attention was a framed memento from the Communist Party of India (Marxist), hailing the Great October Socialist Revolution. In the lobby, Sergio stopped in front of a frame. It was a 3D frame of Stalin—a child, a young revolutionary and a tyrant, all in one.

A flight of stairs led us into the section that chronicles the journey of Stalin from a young boy with poetic ambition to an aspiring priest, and eventually the iron-fisted dictator who brought death and suffering to many. On our way, we were told how Stalin traded seminary scriptures for the writings of Karl Marx around 1899, which later led him to his Communist propaganda. Browsing through the gallery, I noticed the plan of the adjacent building, which houses the former printing press. It revealed two rooms, a well and a series of tunnels hidden in its precincts. I walked over to this

JOYFULL/SHUTTERSTOCK (RAIL WAGON); PRANJALI BHONDE PETHE (VASE)

Stalin's photos (top left) **and other exhibits** (top middle; bottom) **seem to highlight his leadership without underlining the associated gore; A framed memento** (top right) **from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) hailing the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 intrigues.**

building. In one of the rooms was a table adorned with laced tablecloth, books stacked in an alcove and a bed where Stalin slept during his visits. From the mezzanine floor, a well plummeted over 40 feet. Seven feet above the well was the tunnel that housed the secret printing press. A spiral staircase led us to the nearly 122-year-old printing press, manufactured in Germany and used by Stalin to print pamphlets spreading his ideology that called for the removal of the Tsar. The press was raided in 1906 but by then the seeds of Communism had been sown, leading to the Great October Revolution in 1917.

The next day saw me travelling to Stalin's birthplace Gori, a small town 100 kilometres northwest of Tbilisi. Grey skies cast a pall of gloom as rain lashed hard against our windscreen, perhaps in resonance with the bureaucrat's dark reign.

But the Joseph Stalin Museum, with its colonnaded interiors, exquisite chandeliers and a red carpet running up the marbled staircase is far from dark, at least visually. Beneath a stained glass window stands an imposing statue of Stalin in military attire. An arched entrance led us into the gallery, lined with exhibits—paintings, photographs, smaller statues. I noticed that while it touched on most aspects of Stalin's life, it glossed over the tyrannical parts. For instance, it did not cover the period between WWI and WWII when he caused the forced starvation of Ukrainians (Holodomor) from 1932 to 1933, or the Katyn massacre, which involved mass execution of Polish military officers in 1940. Instead, there were paintings of Soviet Generalissimus holding little girls, or happy workers cheering for Stalin. Stalin's gifts too were on display—a wooden casket from Albania, a set of pipes from Italy, expensive vases embossed with the leader's face, and even a grain of rice with prayers inscribed for the dictator's good fortune. The guide pointed to a painting where Stalin's cheeks, cratered by small pox, were prominent. "All of his pictures were doctored. Perhaps they forgot this one," he smiled.

Our next stop was a tiny room that opened into a gulag cell—a crammed-up space with a very low ceiling. This is the only place in the museum where one confronts Stalin's cold bloodedness. Jacques Rossi, author of *The Gulag Handbook*, who spent 19 years in the gulag after being arrested in the Stalin purges of 1936-37, writes, "Gulag was conceived in order to transform human matter into a docile, exhausted, ill-smelling mass of individuals... concerned with nothing apart from evading kicks, cold and ill treatment."

The museum complex sits beside the house where Stalin was born to a cobbler. And few steps from the house is his armoured green rail wagon, which he preferred to travel in, to evade aerophobia. The wagon was equipped with a bedroom, study, bathroom, kitchen and finally a meeting room where one would imagine some of the bloodiest plans in history were hatched. Stepping out of the wagon, I was amused to see an old man selling matchboxes with Stalin's picture on it. Across the street, I spotted shops lined with Stalin memorabilia—Stalin hip flasks, Stalin lighters and cigars. "Gori is the the only place in Georgia that has resisted de-Stalinisation," quipped Giorgi, as we drove out of the museum. "But most revile Stalin for bringing death and suffering to the peace loving Georgians," he added, pointing to the central square, from where Stalin's bronze statue was removed in 2010. ●

ESSENTIALS

There are no direct flights from India to Georgia. Flights from Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru to Tbilisi usually require one or more layovers at Middle Eastern gateway cities such as Sharjah, Dubai, Bahrain, Doha and Istanbul. Avlabari is a 4 km/15 min cab ride away from Freedom or Liberty Square at the city centre. The Joseph Stalin Museum in Gori is 85 km/1.5 hr northwest of Tblisi.

PRANJALI BHONDE PETHE (PHOTO AND FRAME), WALTER BIBIKOW/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (MUSEUM), SERGEI AFANASEV/SHUTTERSTOCK (BULLET)

DO THE HEIGHT THING

WHETHER WE'RE CLIMBERS OR SIMPLY ADMIRERS, SUMMITS LIFT OUR SPIRITS BY HENRY WISMAYER

Sunset lights up India's Nanda Devi.

If you offered to transport me anywhere on Earth for a day, I'd choose a meadow in India beneath the mountain of my dreams. Picture it: A long crescent ridge curls uphill, then sharpens into a pinnacle of ice more than 25,000 feet high, the jet stream whipping a ribbon of cloud from its summit. A citadel of lower peaks rises up around it. And lurking within, at the foot of the holy mountain known as Nanda Devi, lies an inviolable Shangri-la of golden grassland, silent but for the rumble of avalanches and the plaintive bleats of wild sheep.

Remote, awe-inspiring, transcendent, the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, a glacial basin in India's Garhwal Himalayas, embodies everything that I love about mountain country. I've been fortunate to glimpse it from afar, and, since then, I've seen it daily in a panorama hung in a frame on a wall at home. Chances are I'll never reach it—an all but impassable box canyon, the Rishi Gorge, offers the only viable route in.

My interest in mountains, whether climbing them or merely being in their vicinity, began with stories of heroic mountaineers. There wasn't much altitude where I grew up in London. But my baptism came on a gleeful school trip to north Wales spent bouldering among the granite crannies of Snowdonia. By the time a post-university trip took me from south to north up the spine of the Andes, bookish curiosity had graduated into full-fledged passion.

In the years that followed, as I began to travel in earnest, it became an obsession marked by euphoric highs and crushing lows. I've seen crystalline dawns break over the Peruvian cordilleras, spent nights beneath yak hides in a yurt among the Ala-Too steppes of Central Asia, sat mesmerised by the raging dance of Nyiragongo's lava lake in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I've also contracted snow blindness in Iran and almost fallen into a crevasse in Bolivia. I once skidded 300 feet down a couloir on my ass in Morocco's Atlas Mountains, my

MATTHIEU PALEY/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION

progress halted only by the sudden, cartoonish interjection of a snowdrift. An urge to ascend is not without its pitfalls.

Yet ask me to distil what it is about mountains that so possesses people and I falter. The legendary climber George Mallory, speaking to a *New York Times* journalist before his ill-starred attempt on Everest in 1924, uttered perhaps the most celebrated explanation for the pull of a high place: "Because it's there." That this glib refrain should have become so famous an explanation for summit fever—the default riposte to the lowlander's question of "why?"—tells you all you need to know about the visceral, ambiguous allure of mountains. Some of us just can't help seeing a peak without wondering what might be visible from its summit, and we're not sure why.

This much is certain: the fever that gripped Mallory is an urge more cultural than instinctive. For millennia, our relationship with mountains was defined by fear. They were perilous obstacles, best avoided. Only in the 18th century, as early holidaymakers realised that you can't enjoy a view without having a vantage, did trepidation evolve into active adventuring. Those fearsome characteristics of peaks—the exposure, the extremity, the potentially fatal consequences of a misplaced foot—have now become reasons to go.

For me, however, the emotional draw of mountains has always taken precedence over the pursuit of adrenaline. The act of ascending embodies escape; the sight of the lowlands receding—houses reduced to child's bricks, humans to ants—provides sweet refuge for the urban soul. People talk of changing perspectives, of senses heightening in the face of natural permanence and grandeur. The world's great mountains resist any attempt to civilise them—they are too tall, too steep, too wild, too cold. Now more than ever, it's heartening to find a landscape that cannot be tamed. No wonder that mountains from Kinabalu to Kailash remain objects of veneration.

Alpamayo in Peru has a distinctive fin shape.

As barriers to inherent progress, mountains have always forced travellers to slow down and mingle with the communities that cling to them and, more often than not, to avail themselves of a stranger's kindness. Once, in the Ethiopian Highlands, a family welcomed me into their mud-walled hut as a storm broke over the plateau. They turned out their meagre larder, the mother roasting coffee, the father breaking bread, as the children glared at me, an alien in their midst.

It's for moments like this, as much as for the varied topography, that a love affair with high places is a quest without end. It would take many lifetimes to properly explore the world's great ranges, many more to tread the obscure trails hidden among cliffs and clouds. Did you know that the tablelands of Venezuela were the inspiration for Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World? Or that no single point of little Lesotho sits below 4,500 feet? My own list grows.

And even when I'm tied to lower ground—when I'm stuck, as now, behind a computer screen in England—I can still retreat to the mountains in my mind. To that place in India, under a cerulean sky. Because for me, as for many, a travelling life will always defer to John Muir's simple invocation: "The mountains are calling and I must go."

PEAK BEAUTY

ALPAMAYO, PERU (19,511 FEET)

Often described as the most beautiful mountain in the world, Alpamayo is a soaring shark's fin in Peru's Cordillera Blanca, one of the best trekking regions in South America. As the peak is a technical climb, most hikers are content just to be in its presence.

MACHAPUCHARE, NEPAL (22,943 FEET)

An icon of the Nepalese Himalaya, Machapuchare is held sacred by Hindus and off-limits to climbers. Views of its twin "fishtail" summits are nonetheless a highlight of the legendary Annapurna Circuit.

DAMAVAND, IRAN (18,402 FEET)

The highest volcano in the Middle East is also its loveliest: an archetypal snow-capped cone, visible on clear days from the capital, Tehran. Damavand can be climbed by determined amateurs.

GIULIO ERCOLANI/ALAMY

Lucky Bay is known for the whitest sand in Western Australia—and for kangaroos. British explorer Matthew Flinders landed here in 1802 on the HMS *Investigator* (bottom) and gave the island its name.

HOPE FLOATS IN ESPERANCE

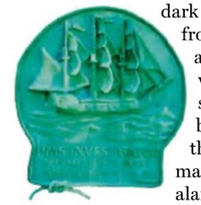
THE COASTAL TOWN IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA OFFERS HEADY VIEWS AND PRISTINE WHITE SAND BEACHES BY KALPANA SUNDER

In Esperance, a town on the southern coast of Western Australia, everything comes back to the ocean—whether it is the whale's tail sculpture on the esplanade by the sea or the food on the table. Esperance started off as a port for the Coolgardie gold fields, but with the arrival of the railway line from Perth, its importance dwindled. From the 1940s, the area became part of the country's wheat belt, and today it's the jumping off point for a beautiful stretch of powdery white sand beaches and national parks that line the coast and its nearby islands.

The town was named after a French ship (*Esperance* means "hope") that took refuge here during a storm. The second windiest place in Western Australia, Esperance experiences the full force of the Indian and Southern Oceans with nothing to block wind and water until Antarctica. The rugged coastline has rocky headlands and miles of beaches.

A group of friends and I take a trip to the Cape Le Grand National Park, 50 kilometres east of the town, on a Land Cruiser. Our guide is Mark Adamson of Esperance Eco-Discovery Tours, a fount of local information. He first drives us to the Wylie Bay sand dunes for a bit of sandboarding. Mounds of sand lie before us like powdery snow. We drive to the base of a dune and trudge up.

Mark gives us precise instructions. "Keep your hands outstretched at the back. Don't take your feet off the board at any point... If you do you will crash, and that's always a little fun for the others." I follow his instructions, and whoosh down. In the distance, native bush, from wild rosemary to wattle, frames the landscape.



From here we drive along the Le Grand beach, on wet sand just behind the waterline. Pacific gulls screech overhead and little clumps of seagrass dot the sands. It's a bewitching landscape, the sea the colour of Curacao liqueur, the blue sky above and the 4WD bumping along. "In Esperance we can't be bothered to walk to a beach. It's part of our lifestyle to drive to a stretch of beach and park there," explains Mark.

He suddenly takes a diversion to reach a narrow creek. The water is dark brown because of the tannins from the tea trees that grow along the banks. "This is fresh water and a popular camping spot," Mark says. Back on the beach he points to little buoys that bob in the ocean: shark markers that can send up an alarm if they sense tagged sharks

JOHN CRUX PHOTOGRAPHY/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (KANGAROOS); SIMON WILKINSON/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (PLAQUE)

to warn swimmers.

We finally drive into Le Grand National Park, with its outcrops of granite and gneiss. The park was named after a French officer who climbed the *Esperance*'s mast during the storm to identify a safe harbour. It has 70,000 acres of native bush with banksias that look like orange candles, native honeysuckle, and orange flowers of the Australian Christmas tree. We drive past Frenchmen's Peak, so named because it resembles the beret worn by French troops in the 1800s. It's a favourite with climbers, and there's a cave with a hole in it at the top, probably formed by wave action 40 million years ago.

The best part of the National Park is Lucky Bay, which is famous for its white sand beaches and its resident beach-bum kangaroos. British explorer Mathew Flinders sailed here during a storm in 1802 and gave the bay its name. Mark explains that there was a controversy some years ago over which beach was the whitest in the country. Samples were collected from across Australia by the National Committee on Soil and Terrain, and Lucky Bay was found to have the whitest sand.

As we walk onto the pristine beach, strewn only with seaweed, I am hypnotised by the sight of a couple of grey kangaroos, digging into some strawberries in a picnic basket left by a tourist. We frantically look for our cameras to get that iconic selfie with a kangaroo on the beach. They pose with us, as if trained to do so. "They come here because of the fresh water creeks behind the beach," explains Mark. We spy another young kangaroo, munching on leaves from a native bush.

Walking along the stretch of beach to find a spot for a picnic lunch, we pass the Lucky Bean van, which sells "Kangachinos" topped with chocolate made to look like kangaroo droppings.

We pitch our picnic chairs and hamper near a wooden walkway to a lookout. Some of our group rush to take a dip, but I sit on a deckchair eating my corn and vegetable salad, enjoying the sea breeze and the gulls waiting for crumbs. The quartz-filled sand is so soft that it squeaks below my feet.

After lunch we drive back on the beach, when Mark slows down the vehicle, saying "Let's go for a wander!" As we prepare to get off the vehicle, he suddenly starts driving up the gargantuan rock face in front of us. We clutch the seats as Mark says cheerfully, "Just an in-vehicle rock climbing experience, guys. Nothing like a bit of Aussie adventure." He manoeuvres the vehicle expertly towards the peak as the wind howls ferociously. At the top we get out for a marvellous view.

The next day we drive along the Great Ocean Drive, 40 kilometres in a circular loop from Esperance—a necklace of white beaches, small bays, towering cliffs and ocean pools, each offering a better view than the next. From the Rotary viewpoint, we can see the remote islands of the Recherché archipelago. On Nine Mile Beach, we see people snorkelling in the clear water of the rock pools. Surfers hang out at West Beach, and we also spot a pod of dolphins, their heads bobbing above the water. Long after I have left Esperance, these images of the ocean remain imprinted in my mind.

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1&2 Esperance's whale tail sculpture is a must-visit spot on the sea-facing esplanade; **3** When at Lucky Bay, try the special "Kangachinos" from the Lucky Bean food truck; **4** The Great Ocean Drive is a 40-kilometre circular loop along the coast from Esperance, and offers stunning views at every turn.

ADRIAN WOJCIK/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES (CITY). TARAS VYSHNYA/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (SCULPTURE). KALPANA SUNDER (TRUCK). PRASIT PHOTO/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (BAY)

The group, MotherFunkers, boogie down at Lakota, in Bristol.

SOUNDS FROM THE CITIES

ALWAYS ON THE HUNT FOR GREAT LIVE MUSIC, A WRITER MAPS OUT FIVE BRITISH CITIES TO CATCH THE VERY BEST OF HOMEGROWN U.K. TALENT BY STEPHEN CONNOLLY

Musicians on tour are great, but nothing beats the floor-shaking reverberations of a crowd stamping for its hometown heroes. On my travels, whenever I catch a local artist playing a show the atmosphere around me completely changes. Instead of feeling like an unremarkable outsider, I suddenly feel the comfort of home, even if just for a couple of hours. The whole experience helps me see people in a new way—unguarded, open, and as familiar to me as old friends.

For those keen on experiencing British music at its source, consider adding these U.K. towns to your bucket list and get to know the scenes—old and new. Visitors unaccustomed to the inconsistencies of British weather will be happy to know that good music can be enjoyed at all these places year-round at indoor venues, which will keep them dry and warm.

MANCHESTER

Although it can be hard to see beyond Manchester's headline history of bands like Joy Division, New Order, The Smiths, and Oasis, arguably its biggest contribution to modern music was **The Haçienda**, a legendary nightclub. Throughout the 1980s, Manchester's most important club was the de facto home of English dance music and the great populariser of the house sound of America. The city's love affair with dance music remains central, but it's now splintered into scenes that typify the diversity of Britain's most linguistically rich city. Different sounds, different voices, and different cultures can be found across the town every night of the week.

If hip hop is your thing, then the multi-talented LEVELZ collective regularly bring their raucous street knowledge to venues like **YES** *(average price £12-15/₹1,000-1,300)*, while on the other end of the spectrum, the much-respected trumpeter Matthew Halsall's Gondwana Orchestra blends spiritual jazz with modern electronics at venues like **Band on the Wall** *(£15-20/₹1,300-1,700)*. For cutting-edge electronic music, try the dancehall flavours of the Swing Ting party at **Soup Kitchen** *(£8-12/₹700-1,000)*, or seek clandestine venues such as **The White Hotel** *(£10-20/₹850-1,700)* and **Hidden** *(£10-20/₹850-1,700)* for the deep-digging selections of DJs and producers like Ruf Dug, the city's own sonic cyberpunk. If it's a full-on acid house experience you've

PHOTO COURTESY: GIULIA SPADAFORA/SOUL MEDIA

come for then don't miss **Homoelectric** *(£12-20/₹1,000-1,700)*, Manchester's wildly hedonistic disco.

OXFORD

With around six million visitors a year, Oxford is already high on many travellers' wish lists. Guidebooks sing the city's praises for having a historic heart where jumbles of elegant buildings cling to each other like lovers. However, in the rock and roll rooms underneath the dreaming spires, the city's also been breeding bands like Ride, Supergrass, and the area's most famous sons, Radiohead, since the 1990s—yet another reason to visit. For a city dominated by university life, perhaps it's no surprise that the music scene in Oxford remains filled with clever young people with access to cheap instruments. To this day the town still thrums with intelligent indie rock bands such as Kanadia, MOTHER and Self Help. In recent years, by far the biggest band to come out of Oxford has been Foals, who've gone from house party gigs on Cowley Road to headlining arenas. The biggest players in town can be found at the **O2 Academy** *(from £20/₹1,700)*, while more independent sounds can be found at **The Bullingdon** *(from £8/₹700)* and **The Jericho Tavern** *(£8-15/₹700-1,300)*, the latter being the fabled pub where Radiohead played their first show in their previous incarnation, On A Friday.

If you're in the mood for something less rambunctious the city also has a rich tradition of symphonic and choral music, fed largely by the presence of serious music students. Two good (and cheaper) places to start are the **Oxford University Orchestra** *(£7-15/₹600-1,300)* and the **Oxford University String Ensemble** *(£5-10/₹400-850)*, both offering top-class talent.

GLASGOW

At all turns, Scotland's largest city keeps taking on its detractors and producing lively, life-affirming cultures that reject the narrative of the city as just a working class Edinburgh. From the hallucinogenic comic books of Grant Morrison to the caustic humour of comedian Frankie Boyle, Glasgow is filled with unapologetic outliers fashioning creativity in their own ways—its music scene being central to the city's expressiveness. Glasgow's been showing its pedigree for decades through massively popular acts such as Primal Scream and Franz Ferdinand. It's even responsible for one of the pop acts who dominated the British music charts in the 1980s and '90s, Wet Wet Wet. Although, perhaps the less said about them the better.

Famous for the buzzing liveliness of its pubs, clubs, and locals, Glasgow is a place to find loud music and sweaty dance floors. A new breed of bands like Comfort and Hairband offer everything from industrial noise to melancholy pop music. They're at their best in the city's classic venues, from basement crowds of dive bar **Nice'n'Sleazy** *(£5-10/₹400-850)* to **King Tut's Wah Wah Hut** *(£15-25/₹1,300-2,150)*, labelled by some in the music press as "quite possibly the finest small venue in the world." With potentially even more accolades, **The Barrowland Ballroom** *(from £20/₹1,700)* is an unembellished temple of sound where the crowd bounces on the sprung wooden floor and the history of performers including David Bowie and Daft Punk fills the air. It all helps to create an atmosphere that makes it the favourite venue of bands including Metallica and Oasis. The city's electronic music scene is no slouch either, with places like **La Cheetah** *(£5-10/₹400-850)* and **Sub Club** *(£5-10/₹400-850)*, which are filled with the house and techno sounds of current favourites Denis Sulta and Jasper James. The uninitiated should pay a visit to Sub Club to see the DJ kings, Optimo, for a bit of insight into the importance of dance music in Glasgow.

BRISTOL

More than any other place on this list, Bristol's music scene is the idiosyncratic result of its history. As one of the main slave trading ports in the 18th century, the population of this south-western city has long had significant influences from Africa and the West Indies. It was in the 1950s and '60s, however, when immigration from the Caribbean expanded the already diverse population, that sound system culture made reggae and ska the default setting for house parties and street celebrations. The influence of those communities on the following decades of DIY post-punk bands like The Pop Group and hip-hop acts such as The Wild Bunch was critical. It was this bedrock of sound that led to the city's biggest musical export, trip hop. In the 1990s, Massive Attack, Portishead, and Tricky all represented Bristol with their beautifully strange, fiercely independent blends of gender and genre; rave and race.

That's a tradition that lives on today in the city that's still regarded as a hotbed of innovation. In the 2000s, Shackleton and Appleblim's Skull Disco label changed the course of dubstep with African polyrhythms, while today, Timedance, Idle Hands, Tectonic, and the Livity Sound imprints all continue to push the edges of underground bass music to psychedelic extremes. The best place to find electronic music is in venues like the hip, audiophile bar, **The Love Inn** *(from £4/₹350)*, or the darker, more diverse rave pit known as **Lakota** *(£4-8/₹350-700)*. For some of the biggest and most popular acts head to **Motion** *(from £15/₹1,300)*, a connected set of abandoned warehouses voted as one of the best nightclubs in the world. It's not all just dance music though because bands like Geoff Barrow's (formerly of Portishead) Beak> and current punk darlings, IDLES, are also pushing a different agenda. For guitar-based music get down to the cheap and cheerful **Louisiana** *(£5-10/₹400-850)*, a 140-person capacity venue that's known as the place to find the next big things—The Scissor Sisters, Florence and the Machine, and The National all having made their Bristol debuts there. Alternatively, for everything from rock to classical head to the beautiful **Colston Hall** *(£25-50/₹2,150-4,300)* where past acts have included The Beatles and The Rolling Stones.

LONDON

Whether it's via Eddy Grant's stroll down Electric Avenue or The Kinks' view of the Waterloo Sunset, most music fans have already met London, even if only through lyrics. More than any other city in the U.K., London's polar mix of urban isolation and multicultural communion inspires and produces waves of new artists and important scenes. There's something to suit every taste and budget, but if you're interested in what's really thrilling about London's contemporary music culture, then it's time to get away from the gargantuan stadium rock of the **O2 Arena** *(from £40/₹3,500)*.

South of the river Thames you'll find venues like **Corsica Studios** *(£5-15/₹400-1,300)* and **Rye Wax** *(£5-10/₹400-850)*. In Shoreditch, to the north, there's **XOYO** *(£10-20/₹850-1,700)*, while the east has **The Pickle Factory** *(£10-15/₹850-1,300)*. Varied as they are, all these places exemplify the kind of cross-pollination of musical styles coming out of the capital. Look out especially for the Rhythm Section record label's parties, which bridge the gaps between house, techno, jazz, soul, hip hop, and world music. Check the listings across the city and you'll find a bubbling mixture that encompasses both live music and energetic, impromptu rave takeovers in bare-walled buildings. Particularly important in recent years has been the south London jazz scene, which has flourished in established spots like **Camden's Jazz Café** *(£10-20/₹850-1,700)* and the **Hackney Arts Centre's EartH space** *(from £20/₹1,700)*. These are the places to head if you're keen to see why artists like Shabaka Hutchings, Ezra Collective, and Rosie Turton are cultivating so much love from a new generation of British music enthusiasts who pack the bars and clubs to hear their heroes play. ●

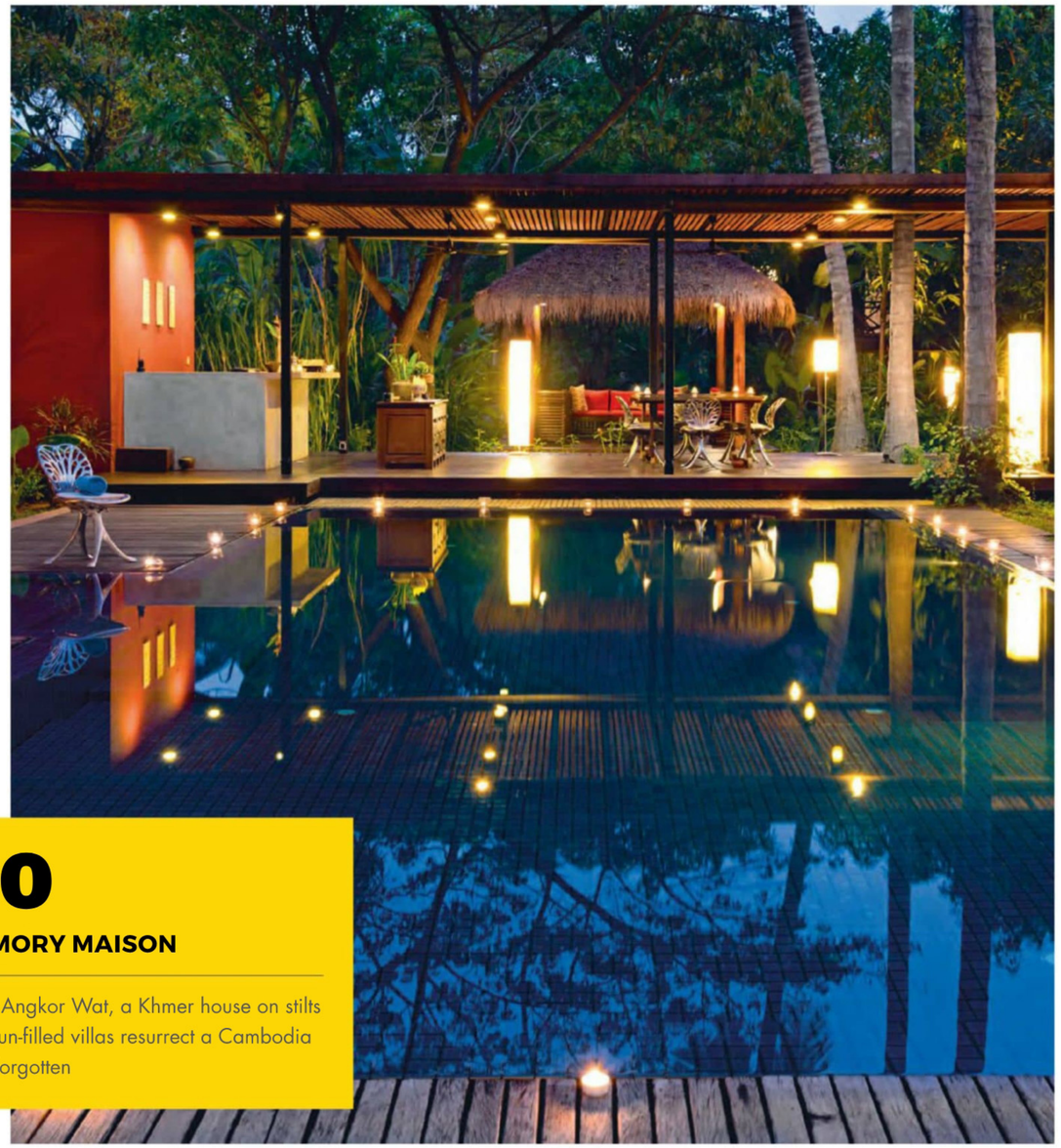
Things get soulful at The Pickle Factory.

PHOTO COURTESY: THE PICKLE FACTORY

ANATOLEYA/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (BIG BEN); PHOTO COURTESY: JODY HARTLEY (CROWD)

A busker (left) **lets his guitar gently weep in front of Big Ben; A fan savours the show and her bevvy at Manchester's YES** (right).

THE ADDRESS



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MEMORY MAISON

Near Angkor Wat, a Khmer house on stilts and sun-filled villas resurrect a Cambodia long forgotten

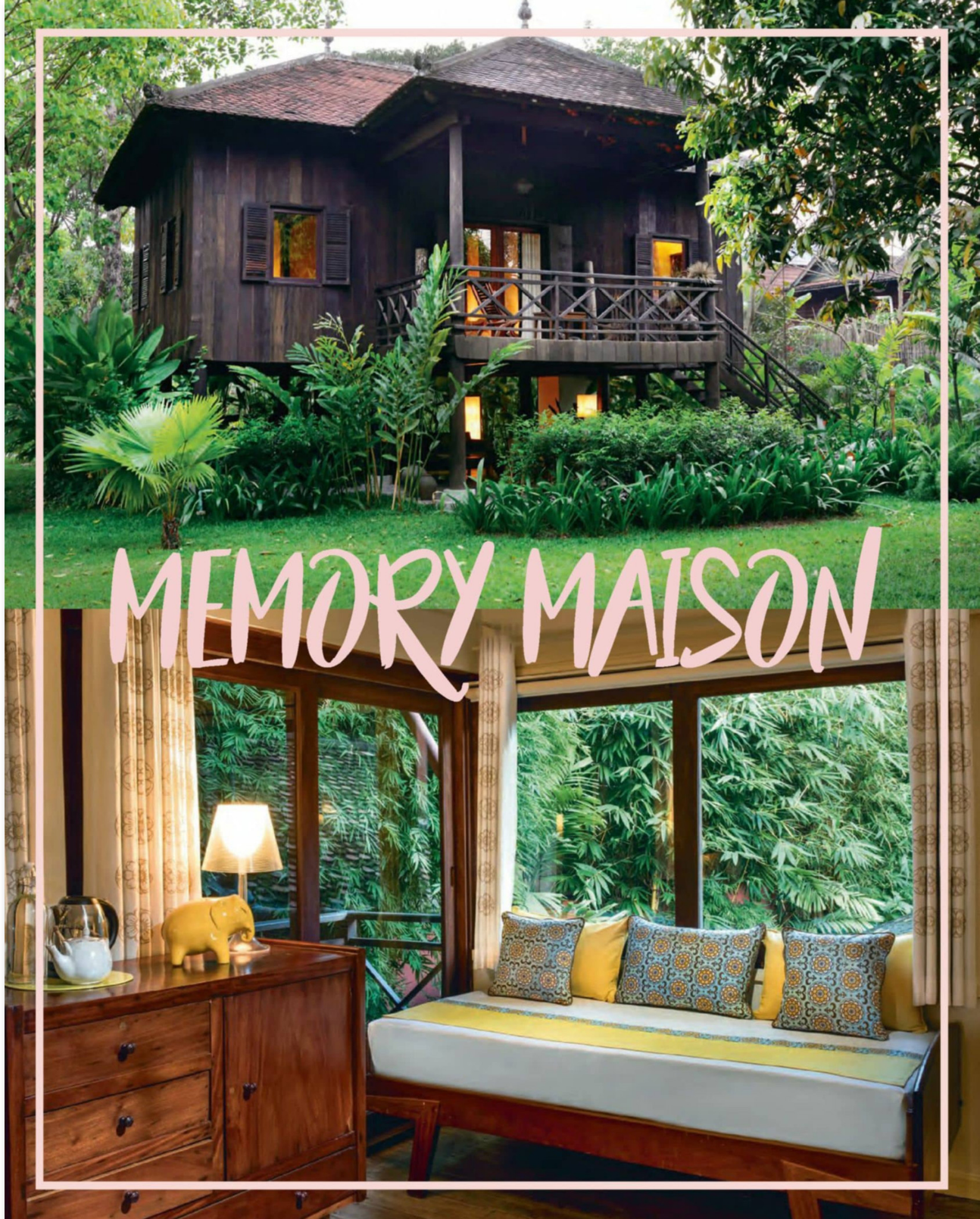

PHOTO COURTESY: MAISON POLANKA

Near Angkor Wat, a Khmer house on stilts and sun-filled villas resurrect a Cambodia long forgotten

By Kareena Gianani

After my first visit to Cambodia in 2012, I'd often reel back to the temples of Angkor and the surrounding temples in my head, as if scrolling down its galleries and corridors on Google Street View. The temples and their myths became almost one in my mind. In Angkor Wat, I'd think of walking down the never-ending wall carved with the 'Churning of the Ocean of Milk'; I could almost touch the gigantic faces on the towers of Bayon temple. When it was recently time to return to Siem Reap, I wondered what a second chance would bring.

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To the east of the Siem Reap River, beyond a Buddhist temple complex named Wat Polanka, a wooden gate with no sign slides to reveal a shock of green. I walk the stone pathway to a concert of bird call, with palm fronds and flowering shrubs nodding along. That's when I see the house on stilts.

Metal spires top its sloping tiled roof, and the louvred windows are dark enough to keep a secret. It is made of wooden planks. It might be as old as the fruit trees it hides behind, but the sleek glass doors and the yellow lights within don't look out of place. This is the Khmer House, a traditional Cambodian villa at the luxury hotel, Maison Polanka.

If the space feels less like a hotel and more like a home, it's because that's what it was between 1992 and 2012 (when it opened to guests). Owned by Nathalie and her husband Jean Pierre, Maison Polanka offers six suites and two villas (including Khmer House) so well nestled in the 6,000-square-metre estate that I always feel like I've stumbled upon them by accident. The hotel hosts only up to 18 people at a given time. Solitude, the best luxury there is, seems to be just the gift Maison Polanka gives its guests.

PHOTO COURTESY: MAISON POLANKA

Occasional Nia retreats at the hotel (bottom) **celebrate the joy of dance and movement.** Facing page: **All rooms in Maison Polanka, be it the Khmer House on stilts** (top) **or the Yellow Suite** (bottom)**, are cocoons of calm.**

My room, the Yellow Suite, is shaped by sunlight. It has a homey feel too, with its buttercup walls and ceiling beams, and canary yellow mats. Details big and small reinforce the feeling that this is no chain hotel; everything feels picked up lovingly by hand, roaming old furniture markets or a woodcarver's workshop. The desk and cupboard were made in the '50s; bedside tables once stood in an old pagoda somewhere. On a wall hangs a watercolour by a Battambang-based artist. One wall is all glass doors to remind you that you're always amid giraffe-size palms. The bathroom upstairs, where branches sway above the skylight, makes you crave a hot shower and a jazz tune. There's a wooden bridge leading out of my room, which I follow until a small gasp escapes me: it ends in a large woody, open-air lounge kitted with armchairs, overlooking the pool and a garden. I think of the number of siestas and daydreams I can have here. If my five-year-old nephew was here, this is just the place we'd have claimed as our machan. We'd lie low under its sloping roof, armed with chips and juice, keeping an eye out for frisky squirrels, parakeets, ants, and the goings-on of the people below.

Soon, I am back at the Khmer House. Built in the 1940s in Sot Nikum village, about 50 kilometres east of Angkor Wat, the stilted home was to be torn down when Jean Pierre bought it to restore it at the estate so Nathalie's parents could live in it. Inside, it is double the size of my suite and still lingers over a time Cambodia has long passed. The couch was originally a children's bed hewn in a wood workshop in the 1930s, as are the armchairs and art deco table. Even the uber-modern lamps and chairs seem like

an experiment between Cambodia old and new, not ill-thought touches. As a deeper tribute to the Khmer spirit, the villa holds the work of local artist Lim Muy Theam.

On my first trip to Siem Reap, I cleaved my days between the temples and walks around Pub Street. Nothing had changed. Every corner still felt like walking through a different door: you can have neon shots and boisterous backpacker parties at Temple Bar; or the sublimest meals made in kitchens run by an expert local, a French chef, or an Italian transplant.

This time, however, there's a third leg to my days—nights by the pool at Maison Polanka with my hands full with ikat purses and wooden marionettes from the night market. That, or a quiet lunch around the water after a morning around the temples. I meet Jean Pierre and Nathalie over one such meal. Nathalie keeps a keen eye on the kitchen, while Jean Pierre is the sort who instantly knows what you might like and bullet-points suggestions. Nathalie was born in Phnom Penh to a Cambodian father and a French mother, and fled Cambodia a year before the brutal Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. She returned in 1990, met Jean Pierre in 1994, and what is my suite today was the room of their first-born in 1997.

To me, the innermost sanctum of Cambodian cuisine is amok: freshwater fish smeared with a kaffir lime-garlic-lemongrass-galangal-turmeric paste and steamed in banana leaf pockets. It tastes like the comfort of being indoors in the rain. Nathalie tells me the fish comes from Tonle Sap lake nearby. There is also grilled eggplant with pork, vegetable spring rolls, and a salad with smoked fish and the fruit of the local makak tree. I've scoured the city for some memorable dishes by then, yet Nathalie's meals stand out for their freshness and taste.

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As I begin returning to the temples, I see how second chances can bolster first impressions. Siem Reap might change to accommodate more travellers by the year, but Angkor Wat remains the same. Newer details emerge in the same ol' 12th-century nooks—a carved apsara smiling toothily, unlike any of the other hundreds in the temple; or the frenzy and agony on the faces of the asuras and devas at the 'Churning of the Ocean of Milk' bas relief. This time at Bayon temple, also 1,000 years old, I sit down to watch others watching the beatific, giant 216 faces of Avalokiteshvara towering skyward. I see a gaggle of photographers chasing light on the stony features, children clinging to their mothers and making finger hearts. It feels like I'm watching my own exhilaration from the outside, six years later. Back then, on my way to the temples of Banteay Srei, I hadn't had the time to stop at Preah Dak village. This time I do, and gulp down the most life-affirming bowl of *nom banh chok*: cool noodles, bean sprouts, banana flowers, water lily stem, mint and basil swimming in a coconut-based curry.

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On my last day at Maison Polanka, I settle down for a game of cards and afternoon tea by the pool. Nibbling on cakes and sipping my iced tea, I hear the trees rustle as other guests pedal out Maison's vintage bicycles for a ride. Perhaps they're out for another evening at Pub Street. Or back to Angkor, to see it like one listens to a bedtime story told time and again, with no less wonder. ●

Time takes long, languid strides in Siem Reap, whether you loll around in the hotel's impeccably designed room (top left)**, nosh a meal of rice and amok** (top right)**, dive into the moody blue pool** (facing page, top)**, or visit the thousand-year-old Bayon Temple** (facing page, bottom)**.**

ESSENTIALS

Maison Polanka is in Siem Reap, a 6 km/15 min drive south of Angkor Wat. It has six suites and two villas, a pool, and a restaurant that serves authentic Khmer and international cuisine *(www.maisonpolanka.com; suite doubles from USD210/₹14,370).*

All flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Siem Reap require at least one layover, mostly in Bangkok. Indians can get a visa on arrival at Siem Reap airport *(USD30/₹2,055, carry two colour photographs).* A 3-day Angkor Pass costs USD62/₹4,245 and includes entry to all temples.

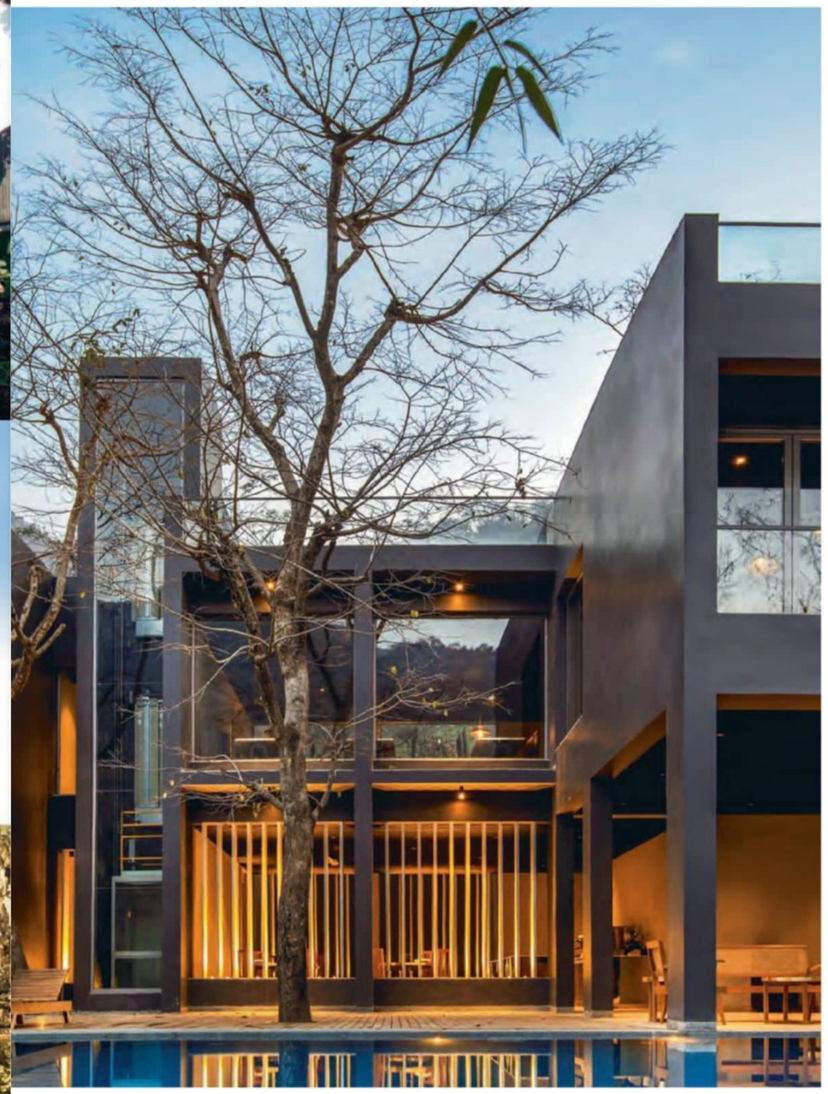
PHOTO COURTESY: MAISON POLANKA (ROOM), JACKMALIPAN/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (FOOD)
FACING PAGE: PHOTO COURTESY: MAISON POLANKA (POOL), TAMVISUT/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (TEMPLE)

SOLITUDE, THE BEST LUXURY THERE IS, SEEMS TO BE JUST
THE GIFT MAISON POLANKA GIVES ITS GUESTS

SACRED FRAMES

Rooms at Roseate Ganges come with ringside views of a forested valley carved by the gurgling Ganga and the Himalayan outdoors always at eye level

By **Gustasp and Jeroo Irani**



Restaurants at Roseate Ganges offer continental fare and poolside views.

She writhed and swayed as the notes of the bhajan wafted off the Ganga like a divine benediction. Like the woman, others in the audience, too, had been transported to a divine plane. On our first evening in Rishikesh, we attended the Parmarth Ashram's Ganga *aarti*, gazing at the jade-green river chortle along its periphery. The deep-timbre chanting was heady, as were the flashes of colour... marigold offerings, flaming lamps, priests garbed in red and gold.

After the stirring aarti, we drove to our own haven for the mind, body and soul, the Roseate Ganges located near the quiet neighbourhood of Shivpuri, the launch site for river rafting, and a half-hour drive north of the thrum of downtown Rishikesh. A luxury boutique resort that offers instant relaxation, the Roseate Ganges is in a sense the newest ashram of wellness in a town that has for many years been a magnet for alternative visitors seeking enlightenment and inner peace. The Beatles famously stayed here in the sixties. Rishikesh hasn't looked back since.

During our three-day stay, we would rise at the crack of dawn and run down the stone steps hewn into a hill slope, which led to a lovely a white sand beach by the Ganga. Clad in kurta pyjamas, given to us by the resort, we did our asanas on the beach, albeit clumsily, led by agile Susmita Rakshit, wellness manager and a graduate of the Bihar School of Yoga.

That was the most precious part of our day, for we communed with nature, listened to our bodies and tracked our breath in the most serene setting imaginable. After our work out, we preferred to pad up to the resort for an organic breakfast of either an Ayurvedic breakfast bowl of stone-mill-ground Himalayan barley porridge with stewed fruits; or our favourite, poached Turkish

PHOTO COURTESY: THE ROSEATE GANGES, RISHIKESH

All ingredients used in Chidya Ghar restaurant (top left) are locally sourced; The rooms (top right) come equipped with Italian marble flooring, cosy fireplaces and balconies embracing the Himalayan outdoors; The Beatles Ashram (bottom) is a must-visit for all travellers.

eggs wobbling in a mini lake of yogurt spiced with garlic, salt and pepper, and tempered with local *lakhori* chillies sautéed in butter. The sweet finale was the masala chai poured from a coppery tea pot, which, like all crockery here, is sourced from a minimalist Japanese brand.

Roseate Ganges itself is a minimalist complex of 16 deep-grey chalets, snuggling in a secret forest of banyans, stands of bamboo and other gangly trees, with the Ganga flowing swiftly in the gorge below. So discrete is the resort, spread over 1.5 acres, with villas placed at different levels, that it seems to virtually tiptoe out of the planet. Italian marble flooring, rough-finish walls, cosy fireplaces and balconies embracing the Himalayan outdoors are designed for idyllic noontime siestas or meditation. The rooms and public areas are done in natural colours, leavened with touches of gold.

Our favourite spot to hang out was by the temperature-controlled infinity pool in the main complex of concrete, glass and wood, awash in the gentle half-light of a setting sun. Overlooking the infinity pool is Roasted by Roseate, an open-fronted café with sweeping views of the woods.

Above it is the glass-enclosed bar and restaurant Chidya Ghar whose display kitchen showcases the chefs' culinary sleights of hand. The menu is wellness-focussed, based on Uttarakhand cuisine, with some nouvelle twists on international dishes. Thanks to executive chef Chetan Rana, we dined on local cuisine inspired by Kumaoni and Garhwali home chefs—*kathal* (baby jackfruit) biryani concocted with Dehradun basmati rice; tomato-based Nainital egg curry; Garhwali *bhuna gosht*, tender chunks of Himalayan mountain goat slow-cooked in a subtle gravy and simmered in a copper vessel. All ingredients are sourced from within a 15-kilometre radius and spiked with Himalayan forest herbs and exotica like wild mustard seeds, hemp seeds and wild onions.

We made a couple of sorties to the spa, too, and emerged limbered up and rested as much from the pummelling as from the verdant forest views outside.

On our last evening, we climbed up to the rooftop to revel in the stunning views, of terraced hillsides, of the silver skein of the Ganga. She is indeed a beneficent presence in these parts, murmuring ancient secrets to those who care to listen. ●

ESSENTIALS

The closest airport for Rishikesh is Dehradun from where The Roseate Ganges *(www.roseatehotels.com)* is a 1.5-hour drive on the Rishikesh-Badrinath road. Tariff starts at ₹27,000 for a deluxe villa and at an additional cost, the resort offers experiences like ashram hopping, adventure sports and customised wellness programmes.

GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI (FOOD & GRAFFITI). PHOTO COURTESY: THE ROSEATE GANGES, RISHIKESH (BEDROOM)

THE DESTINATION

SUPPALAKKLABDEE/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS/GETTY IMAGES

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Driving and camping along Iceland's Ring Road leads to geothermal sites, whale sightings, and emerald national parks

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Ski Like a Girl

Sometimes learning to ski means imagining flight

By Shikha Tripathi

It takes plenty of falls and plodding around to just go down the beginner's slope at Lake Tahoe's Diamond Peak, but the effort is worth it.

PHOTO COURTESY: ZAC SMITH/DIAMOND PEAK

On the slopes, just do what I told you. And when you get off the chair, remember you're Supergirl," says Jan, my ski instructor with whom I've just finished beginner lessons. Her shift for the day is over, but I'm staying put. It's been half a grueling day at Diamond Peak in Incline Village, Lake Tahoe, and I'm just about starting to get used to the painful contraptions called ski gear strapped onto my feet. I get back on the chairlift of the practice stretch, finish the loop, and fly like Supergirl when it's time to get off.

All the skiing footage I've ever seen, up until I actually try it, is one, dazzling magic show with the skier on a gigantic slide, gliding effortlessly as plumes of fresh snow fly off the sides, made all the more glamorous with slo-mo effects. So when I get an opportunity to go skiing in Nevada's Tahoe region, I'm eager to recreate in reality the grandeur of the sport in my head.

As an outdoor person with decent hiking and climbing experience, I assume skiing is going to be a piece of cake. I don't realise at first that, like any other outdoor sport, what looks effortless is the result of years of practice, dedication, numerous falls and multiple bruises, and sometimes even serious injuries.

The first shocker comes before I even hit the snow—with outfitting. After putting on my down jacket and puffy pants, strapping on a helmet, and feeding my height and weight into a gear payment receipt machine, I am directed to a counter where a adolescent hands me my boots. These turn out to be nearly as heavy as snow boots used in mountaineering; each weighs up to two kilos. The pair of skis that comes next leaves me staggering too. Depending on your body and the brand you use, they can weigh anywhere from four to six kilos.

And then, there's pinning those boots to the skis. Followed by waddling around like a duck with close to six kilos strapped to your feet, trying to stay steady while also juggling ski poles and goggles. It is remarkable how, with training, this very gear that feels like blocks of cement set around your feet, transforms into the vehicle that makes you fly across snow.

I lug my skis outside to where the action is—in a novice's case, the beginner's stretch. "Not so quick", says Jan, who makes us stop even before the beginner's patch, which is where all my maiden lessons take place. Before you learn to ski, you have to actually learn to stand in skis. And walk baby steps without falling. And climb up (sideways for better grip) a very minor slope with a gradient only slightly higher than zero.

Worse than falling is getting back on your feet confidently (not possible without help if you're wearing skis, and not possible on your own until many lessons later) without feeling belittled by the three-year olds zooming past you. I'm in good company though; Michelle, the other learner with me, is from Mexico where it rarely snows. And yet, by the end of the day, we will be skiing down Lodge Pole together, a run that even we didn't believe we would do.

"Pizza!" shouts Jan as I glide down the beginner's stretch, having been promoted to it from the practice patch. An actual cheese-laden pizza would have been nice at -10°C, but unfortunately, "pizza" is simply a word for the triangular wedge you form with your feet to come to a stop when careering down a slope. The wider it is, the more effective the stop.

In theory that works very well, except for people like me who have what Jan repeatedly calls a "lazy left leg". I have to unlearn much of my hiking and climbing habits; unlike using your entire body, skiing is by-and-large a sport of the feet, and keeping the rest of the body still is actually conducive to better form. "Edgy wedgies"—clips that keep the tips of your skis together facilitate this, also helping to keep the tails apart, which makes learning to turn smoother.

Over repeated runs and countless falls off the ski chair I learn to snap off the "alligator mouth" or brake pedal to unlock the ski, stand up and lock it back on. I begin again. And again—stopping at "Red!" and kicking off at "Green!", and gliding when Jan yells "Yellow". My prime learnings are that going steady is more important than going fast, that centering your weight is key, and that looking down instead of ahead is a recipe for disaster. And in a moment of epiphany, just like learning to ride a bike, it suddenly clicks and your body knows exactly what to do. Finally, I am skiing. And getting off that chairlift and swinging back on the slope without malfunction.

At lunch, I sit down for a hearty meal at Snowflake Lodge, which sits at an altitude of over 6,560 feet at the top of the Lakeview Chairlift. I surprise myself with my appetite, but skiing is actually a full body workout. Jan leaves soon after lunch, but we are back on the hill skiing with Paul, another instructor at Diamond Peak. He is eager to push our boundaries, and thanks to Paul the last run of the day is down my first proper beginner's run, a feat I wish Jan was around to witness. When it's time to literally hang my boots at the end of the day, I stagger around for a bit. I feel lighter than air, like a tortoise that has been carrying around a shell for 200 years that is finally ripped off. All the shuffling down flights of stairs, balancing on the pot during a pee break, and trying to make carrying skis look effortlessly cool while actually struggling, is forgiven when the Gear Independence bells toll.

The next morning on Heavenly peak with instructor Greg, things look up; it's sunnier, my confidence is higher, and the falls and public humiliation minimal. I am determined to be at least a "beginner level" skier by the time I leave, so after a half day of practice, I am hitting the green slopes, or beginner runs. I go down Maggie's Run thrice, and Chris, a veteran skier, is impressed as she spots me zooming up there among others.

When I leave, I'm eager to return to skiing to climb up to the blue slopes (the colour indicates a moderate level). And I don't even have to imagine flying like Supergirl anymore; all I need to do is to ski like a girl—sassy, and in control.

Essentials

GETTING THERE There are one-stop flights between Delhi/Mumbai and Reno-Tahoe International airport, it is economical to fly to San Francisco, which is 3.5 hr away from North Lake Tahoe.
SKIING The best time to ski at Tahoe is from mid-Dec to mid-Apr. Tickets can be purchased on the spot, but it's convenient to book ahead online. A typical hourly private lesson costs around ₹9,000 and one for 2-5 people costs about ₹12,000 per hour. It's better to rent equipment than buy it, especially if you're a beginner. Drink lots of water despite the cold—skiing is an active sport that dehydrates your body like any other.
STAY There are plenty of places to stay around Lake Tahoe, but the Hyatt Regency in North Tahoe tops them all with chic rooms and outdoor hot tubs; you'll be tempted to jump in even when it's snowing *(www.hyatt.com)*.

The best reward of skiing down Heavenly Peak are stunning views of Lake Tahoe (top left); It takes a lot of skill to create a beautiful 'snow crash' (top right) while skiing, and also continuing effortlessly; Once you get the hang of it, few winter sports are as much fun as skiing, especially when you have company (middle left); The long chairlift ride up Diamond Peak (middle right and bottom left) is picturesque and a thrilling adventure in itself, as long as you strap on your skis firmly and don't drop them midway! It is advisable to pick up gondola tickets online to avoid queues (bottom right) strapped up in ski gear (middle).

PHOTO COURTESY: **TAHOE SOUTH** (SKIING ZOOM OUT), **BILL STEVENSON/STOCK CONNECTION/DINODA PHOTO LIBRARY** (MAN), PHOTO COURTESY: **CHRIS BARTKOWSKI/DIAMOND PEAK** (FRIENDS), **XZ114/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES** (MOUNTAIN), **LARRY ZHOU/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES** (SKI LIFT), **ANDREI STANESCU/ISTOCK EDITORIAL/GETTY IMAGES** (TICKET COUNTER), **1000PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK** (SNOWBOARDS)

A KIWI KINDA WILD

Yellow-eyed penguins coming home, sea lions play-fighting on beaches, and fur seals having a lovers' tiff—in New Zealand, a short drive from the city means spotting rare, darling creatures in the wild

BY KAREENA GIANANI

Wait long enough in the discreet sheds built along the Otago Peninsula and you'll see yellow-eyed penguins waddle out of the sea after a hard day's swim. They're among the rarest in the world, but Otago gives visitors ample time to observe their adorable antics.

DUNEDIN

Come hail or harsh sun, the Otago Farmers Market pops up outside Dunedin Railway Station every Saturday morning. Its stained glass windows perk up when the morning light hits its early-20th-century facade. In the lawns, out come pumpkins the size of doll houses, Pinot Noirs from the Central Otago Peninsula, and buskers with guitars and voices like honey. A Frenchman hands me two crêpes: one with poached pear bundled in chocolate sauce and custard, another packed with Jerusalem artichokes, pork, cheese and egg. People's purses balloon with jars of fragrant honey made from manuka bushes. A man with crinkly eyes doles out bacon butties, pepper pâté, and a smile each. And pies, oh there are pies everywhere. I try the traditional hangi (Maori feast) pie with beef, pumpkin, kumara (sweet) potato, and carrot. I feel I'll never be able to eat another meal again. Until I move to the next truck.

It has been a long time since a group of Scottish settlers came to this part of Maori land in the mid-19th century and named it Dunedin ('Dùn Èideann' is the Scottish Gaelic name for Edinburgh). Today, the city is a peppy university town, with ringing pubs, stunningly preserved Victorian and Edwardian buildings, a castle, and even its own kilt shop.

But I am here for Otago Peninsula, a mere 30-minute ride yet a world away, where the van waiting outside the railway station will take me.

Beyond the window of this little shed is a world that was never tamed. Cliffs so high that they'd tingle toes; the sea so blue that it can see into your soul. Dusk makes the ancient bays and beaches of the Otago Peninsula seem a bit broody. The wind howls and roars, but the green and gold tussock by the harbour bears it stoically.

I peer a few feet ahead, at the sea. Anytime now.

A yellow-eyed penguin emerges; it toddles slowly with hunched shoulders, as if walking back from school after flunking a maths test. I can sympathise: it has dived into the sea 200-300 times today, swimming 65-230 feet each time in search of seafood. It comes close enough to the shed for me to see its rad yellow eyebands—which gives it its name. Its irises too are the colour of van Gogh's "Sunflowers."

Knee-high in size, this penguin species is believed to be the world's rarest; about 3,000-odd ones are found only here, in New Zealand, on the eastern and southern coasts of South Island. I'm incredibly lucky to see them like this in the wild, where they roam free and are at home.

In seconds, more and more cuddly creatures rise from the sea, some strutting like calendar models, oblivious to me and my guide silently whooping in the hide. Mark, the guide, has seen this hundreds of times; he taps my arm when one penguin throws back its arms à la Shah Rukh Khan, and emits a long shrill cry. "Their Maori name is *hoiho*, which means 'noise shouter'," Mark whispers as the penguin sings with rockstarish head-shaking. Hoihos aren't very sociable; I watch one accidentally headbutt a sheep on its way up the cliff behind us, waddling on quickly without meeting its eye. At the top, one curious lone penguin stands like Christ the Redeemer. For 15 whole minutes.

All life in the 33-kilometre Otago Peninsula revolves around preserving its creatures—the yellow-eyed and little blue species of penguins, New Zealand fur seal, New Zealand sea lion, and royal albatross. Large stretches are unpaved and settlements are small; it's heartening to see some private properties have walking tracks for the easy passage of tourists. Trench-like hides built at various beaches and corners along the peninsula ensure that some wildlife (penguins in particular) rarely comes in direct contact with visitors. Operators like Mark's company, Elm Wildlife Tours, are visibly passionate about ecotourism.

At the northernmost tip of Otago Peninsula is Taiaroa Head. The main attraction on this windswept piece of land jutting from the coastline is The Royal Albatross Centre, the only breeding colony on a mainland for the world's largest seabird. Their wingspans are more than 10 feet (that's twice the size of my mother). Rob, a guide at the centre, leads me to a viewing room with a glass panel. A young chick is huddled outside on a patch of grass, looking like it were made of cotton balls. Adult albatrosses spend almost 80 per cent of their time at sea, returning only to feed their young. They divvy up parenting, like the progressive spouses they are. Rob speaks of these gentle giants as if their lives are no less gripping than his favourite soap opera. "Royal albatrosses, or *toroa*, have a three-year mating period, so if you get bored of your partner, it's going to be a while before you'll settle down again," he says. His favourite albatross here, he adds, was the one called 'Grandma' because she raised her last chick at 62. "She divorced one of her partners, but got back again. Then there's one here in his 30s, who is bereaved and hasn't put himself out there again," rues Rob. As the perfect ending of his story, an adult toroa comes soaring in a circle, and swoops in towards its chick. I see its grace. These "ocean wanderers" fly 1,90,000 kilometres a year; I think of how, in less than eight months, a strong gust of wind will launch the baby albatross on its maiden flight.

Exploring the Otago Peninsula largely on foot, beside empty beaches, inlets, and dreamy purple clusters of hebe blossoms, feels more intimate than a safari. It also drives home an important lesson: that it's me who's on the turf of these creatures. Making myself invisible—huddling in hides, standing behind glass panels—is key to understanding them.

So I feel oddly exposed when Mark walks down Papanui beach in long strides, towards two, five, nay, nine sea lions roaring and gamboling in the sand. "They are endemic, the Hooker's sea lions; confident around humans. Maintain safe distance, and you're fine," he says, coaxing me to stand about eight feet away from one that weighs at least 350 kilograms. He takes photos while I look over my shoulder at the way the creature bullies and playfights smaller lions around him, throwing sand over them, barking and chasing them. Almost all sea lions at Otago, I learn, are related to 'Mum,' a female who had a pup here in 1993—the first to be born on the mainland in over 100 years *(www.elmwildlifetours.co.nz; tours from NZD122/₹5,760 adults, children NZD112/₹5,300).*

PHOTO COURTESY: DUNEDINNZ (ALBATROSS), MICHAEL RUCKER/IMAGEBROKER/GETTY IMAGES (SEA LIONS), DIANNE MANSON/GETTY IMAGES ENTERTAINMENT/GETTY IMAGES (MURAL), DANIELHARWARDT/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (COAST). PREVIOUS SPREAD: LOLA TSVETAEVA/SHUTTERSTOCK (GRAPHIC BORDER), LINEARTESTPILOT/SHUTTERSTOCK (KIWI ILLUSTRATION). XAVIER FORES - JOANA RONCERO/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (PENGUIN)

30 MIN drive from Dunedin

Milky royal albatrosses (one the world's largest birds) and cheeky Hooker's sea lions (bottom) are some of the creatures that call the Otago Peninsula home (bottom inset).

WELLINGTON

From the airplane, you can see the Hollywood-style sign perched on a hillside. 'Wellington' it reads, the last two letters askew, floating skyward. On ground, the world's windiest city pops with Victorian homes along its harbour.

That evening, my walk from Wellington's waterfront to Cuba Street passes through revolving doors of the world: Japanese, Vietnamese, Moroccan, and Indonesian food aromas come drifting, transporting me to secret kitchens. Coffeemakers hiss with head-clearing Cuban coffee at Fidel's café; a puppeteer pulls strings to make her puppet paint a portrait of a little girl standing close by, sending her into squeals of disbelief. At Cuba Street's night market, a persistent steampunk jewellery artist, a bookshop, and a paella stall tug at my heart and purse strings.

They say you can walk from one end of the Kiwi capital to the other in 30 minutes, and I do. The morning after, I book a tour with Seal Coast Safaris to look beyond the windy city. In just 20 minutes, Kent, my guide for the three-hour tour, drives the 4WD to a wind turbine on Brooklyn Hill, through private farmlands with ostrich and red deer. Soon, I see old mountains lick the waters of the South Coast. Wellington seems far away, and this place its rustic sibling—no golden sand beaches or sunbathers, no people at all. Just the sea pummelling grey outcrops and hills that look a giant's hairy back. When Kent stops along one of the beaches, at Tongue Point, I get out and—with a shock—realise I am surrounded by at least 15 New Zealand fur seals. Some look out at the robin's-egg blue water. Others yawn as I tiptoe towards them, but begin hissing and spitting when I get too close. Two fur seals seem to be having a lovers' tiff, smacking and flapping their flippers at each other. Another one scratches its neck and looks bored with their drama *(www.sealcoast.com; tours from adults NZD125/₹5,900, children 14 and under NZD62.5/₹2,950).*

20-MIN drive from Wellington

All you need to observe New Zealand fur seals along Tongue Point is curiosity and a healthy 15-foot distance.
Facing page: The world's rarest and smallest Hector's dolphin swim in the waters along the town of Akaroa.

SKYIMAGES/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (SEAL); FOTOSHOOT/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (BOY)

AKAROA

Roses bloom outside colonial homes in Rue Balguerie, and onion soup bubbles in old-timey cafés in nearby Rues. Iridescent paua shells mark some graves in the Old French Cemetery up the hill. I haven't woken up in France, but it's easy to forget that in the little town of Akaroa, a 1.5-hour drive away from Christchurch, South Island's largest city.

Hewn from a volcano, Akaroa tucks charm in the little things—a walk to its lighthouse that watches over Caribbean-blue waters of the Banks Peninsula; stories of how French settlers arrived at its shores in 1840 only to find that the British had beaten them to it; or at the Giant's House, a sculpture garden with Gaudi-like mosaics and Dali-esque whimsy.

Akaroa is catnip for another, significant reason—it is the home of the rare Hector's dolphins, among the world's smallest at five feet and endemic to New Zealand. When a Black Cat Cruise ship takes me and other visitors into the bay, cathedral-like coves and mystical orange-brown volcanic formations surround us. Seals scamper as our boat inches closer to the rockface. And then, as suddenly as they rose, the grey-black bodies of three Hector's dolphins sink into the waters ahead of us. The boat stops, and a little girl beside me giggles every time the dolphins hiss and pop up like a jack-in-the-box of the sea. Our skipper points out their black dorsal fins—rounded, instead of pointed. Some cruises offer a chance to swim with Hector's dolphins too *(blackcat.co.nz; cruise NZD85/₹4,015, children 5-15 NZD35/₹1,650).*

ALONG Akaroa's harbour

PHOTO COURTESY: GRAEME MURRAY (DOLPHIN); DENNIS MACDONALD/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (MOSAIC STATUES)

ESSENTIALS

Flights between Delhi or Mumbai and New Zealand's capital, Wellington—or Christchurch in South Island—require at least one layover in a gateway cities such as Sydney or Singapore. Dunedin is connected to Christchurch by regular domestic flights and two buses a day *(6 hr; www.intercity.co.nz).* Self-drive is the most popular way to travel within New Zealand. Indian travellers can apply for a New Zealand visa online *(www.immigration.govt.nz).* A month-long visa costs NZD246/₹11,435 and is processed within 28 working days.

Bubbling mud pots, iridescent mineral deposits and steaming fumaroles at the geothermal site of Hverir are the stuff of dreams. It's worth driving east of Lake Mývatn to witness this spectacle.

DISPATCHES FROM ISLANDIA

Driving and camping along Iceland's Ring Road opens up a vivid universe of geothermal sites, whale sightings, and national parks weaved with emerald felt

BY DEBASHREE MAJUMDAR

HÚSAVÍK, DAY 7

The sperm whales showed up one and a half hours into our journey across the Arctic sea. The sky had turned leaden and the sea had merged with it, and the only line differentiating the two was the school of six whales spouting water from their blowholes. The sprays spread into the air and disappeared like dandelions in a storm, reappearing every few minutes. Next to me, a six-foot-tall American doubled over with sea-sickness was retching into the Arctic. His wife, although sympathetic to his plight, looked a bit annoyed at having to let go of this ecstatic photographic moment of whale sighting. I observed the whales, swaying between dizziness and exhilaration, grateful to have finally seen them, regretful that the puffins had not shown, and impatient to stand firm on land once again.

***

My husband, S, and I are in the whaling town of Húsavík in the north coast of Iceland and we've been driving and camping for over a week now. Having started with sunny weather, our undependable luck caught up with us by Day 4 and we've had the rains chasing us for days. They come and go, leaving the campsites damp and muddy, making our task of pitching tents every evening before dinner a Herculean effort that we've been managing so far with steady swigs of whiskey. But after the whales have been seen, and the nightmare of a boat ride endured without messy accidents, I insist that we need the comfort of a warm B&B. After we've had the most luxurious sleep in days, we're refreshed and ready for some more camp living. But the sky outside still bears down on the sea with its dark clouds and I ask the man at the reception doing our bills if the weather is always this challenging? He looks up at me with eyes full of remorse and says, "I have to say you have real bad luck because until the day before the sun was out and shining and the sea was the bluest of blues. I wish you better luck when you come next." I thank him with the saddest smile I can muster and leave the building hoping against hope for the sun to show.

Camping in Vatnajökull National Park is a pinch-yourself-to-see-if-it's-real sort of experience; Between May and August, the tiny island of Lundey, just off Húsavík, hosts nearly 2,00,000 Atlantic puffins (right) who gather here to breed.

HENN PHOTOGRAPHY/CULTURA/GETTY IMAGES (CAMP); FEDEVPHOTO/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (PUFFINS)
PREVIOUS SPREAD: PROMEDIA SUDATH/SHUTTERSTOCK

HVOLSVÖLLUR, DAY 2

We've left behind the lights and tin-walled dwellings of Reykjavik to go deeper into the south on Route 1 or the Ring Road which goes in a complete circle surrounding most of Iceland, giving the fjords in the west a miss. As far as the eye can see, there are no people, just table-topped mountains covered in a spill of moss and lichen and black volcanic soil. Years ago, when the unpronounceable Eyjafjallajökull erupted, halting air traffic in most of Europe, I had looked at stock images and marvelled at its scale. Now looking at other lava fields spreading out around us I feel like I'm inside a movie. Each scene reveals an even more improbable landscape—a desolate, untouched wilderness of low shrubbery, blue rivers and gushing waterfalls which appear with the regularity of punctuation in a very long, artful sentence. There are sheep grazing, their coats so bulky and furry they look like white and black hay bales on a limitless farm. And then there are the horses—stout, docile, their manes flowing in the chilly wind like a mythical beast's. The animals and fields seem suspended in time as if they've always been there and always will be irrespective of days passing and seasons changing.

As we enter the campsite at the town of Hvolsvöllur, 106 kilometres southeast of Reykjavik, and set up our tents and ready our portable stove for dinner, we see a woman with a shock of silver, frizzy hair approaching us. "Are you going to need a shower?" she asks. We nod in

The summer night is feeble and the volcanic beaches inky black; an unknown deserted universe laid out flat and open just for us

Watching the aurora (left) spill colours on the Icelandic night sky isn't a memory you'll likely forget; Húsavík (middle) sits on the eastern shore of Shaky Bay and has the distinction of being the whale capital of Iceland; The Church of Akureyri (right) is the town's most enduring symbol and holds a notably large 3,200-pipe organ.

OLIVIER BERGERON/500PX PLUS/GETTY IMAGES (NORTHERN LIGHTS); ALEXEYS/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (LAKE); COOLKENGZZ/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (CHURCH)

obviousness. She then holds out her palm for 800 krónas as fee for using the hot shower at the campsite. We pay her quick and watch her go knocking on every other parked vehicle or pitched tent. She tells us cheerily that she comes every evening to clean the camp kitchen and bathrooms, housed in two red-painted portable structures, and collects the charges for maintenance. As we wait for our sausages and eggs to cook and sip on coffee from camping mugs, we watch the quiet campsite slowly fill up with cars and the hum of chatter, and then tents pop up like colourful igloos dotting the ground with oranges, army greens, and dark blues. The late-summer wind makes us shiver and finally, when the long day is taken over by a darkening sky, we wait for the stars to come slowly aglow.

SKAFTAFELL AND VATNAJÖKULL NATIONAL PARK, DAY 4-5

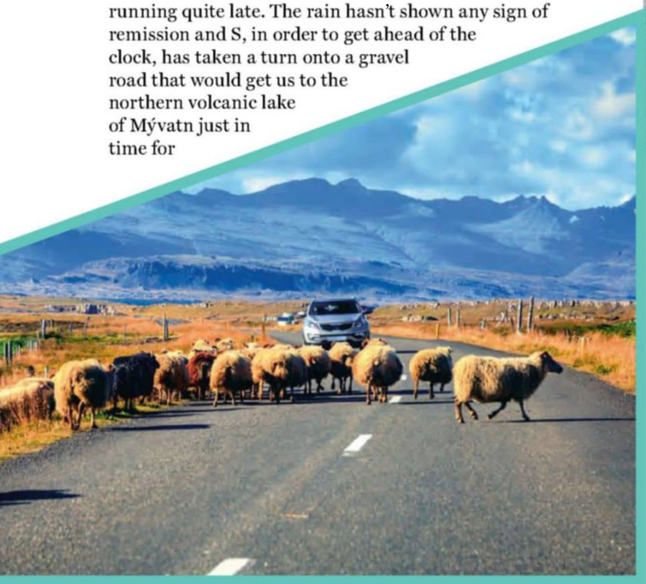
Driving on Route 1 has felt more like comfort than chore. We've escaped a tourist-saturated south for the moonscape of Skaftafell, a scenic area in Vatnajökull National Park in Iceland's southeast. The summer night is feeble and the volcanic beaches inky black; an unknown deserted universe laid out flat and open just for us. We've driven past vast green treeless expanses; strolled along cold, black-sand beaches strewn with ice blocks broken off from Vatnajökull—Iceland's largest ice cap—shining like diamonds under a timid sun. We've been soaked from the spray of the mighty Dettifoss waterfall as it frothed and foamed its way into the Jökulsá á Fjöllum river. We've set up our moveable home at Skaftafell, on fields of green bordered by hills that looked as if the skies had parted and poured giant buckets of emerald felt down them for years.

MÝVATN, DAY 6

Thanks to the eye-popping landscape we've had so many stops on the way that we have lost track of time and are running quite late. The rain hasn't shown any sign of remission and S, in order to get ahead of the clock, has taken a turn onto a gravel road that would get us to the northern volcanic lake of Mývatn just in time for sun down. We bounce over hills, and slow down like a cautious cat at bends looking out for blind turns. A dense, impenetrable fog swirls outside and at one point I'm certain we're about to crash to our deaths. Then as suddenly as it had descended, the fog lifts and clears our vision to a wall of waterfalls on the horizon. We drive down the slim, gravel track leading back to Route 1.

We continue our drive down the almost buttery smooth Ring Road flanked by mountains and clear, sparkling lakes. We occasionally spot an iron letterbox and reckon the lone house that stood a mile away from the highway overlooking the sea. Here is isolation and its gift of abundance—each individual on his or her own acre in the midst of nowhere and with a window on the infinite blue horizon. Here it is possible to respect nature and to take refuge in it.

Slowly we approach Mývatn, our stop for the night. Steam rises from grey muddy pits bubbling with boiling mud sediments, and the air reeks of sulphur. The landscape has yet again, unmistakeably and without warning, changed. A vast ochre desert lies open before us against the setting sun and steam columns reach up to kiss the sky. We drive further down into the town and pitch our tent by the calm, teal Mývatn lake. While stuffing our faces with steaming pasta, we watch ducks swim past us and count the sad-eyed sheep that flock on the hill right across.



ALEXEY STIOP/SHUTTERSTOCK (ANIMALS), TECHNOTR/E+/GETTY IMAGES (BEACH)

AKUREYRI AND HVAMMSTANGI, DAY 8-9

When we arrive in the northern town of Akureyri, the rain has finally left us and the sun is high in the sky. We visit cafés and bookshops and drink beer at hipster bars. We see trees like poplar and rowan, which we hadn't seen anywhere else in the country, and walk past gardens bursting with scarlet and golden flowers. We take the most spirit-restoring dip in the town's public hot pool—a complex with four pools set to different cool and hot temperatures just to afford you the best sleep that will surely follow. Elderly men and women sit in extended circles murmuring like politicians—a daily ritual for most Icelanders.

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We get back on the road again and drive past farms alternated with steep, mountainous descents until we take a right and drive into the northwestern village of Hvammstangi standing right next to the sea. The Arctic has turned rough again, and the wind has picked up after an afternoon's rest. We struggle to pitch our tent against the strong currents but finally manage to make it steady for our last night out in the open. After dinner, we venture out to spot the Milky Way. As we train our eyes on the northern sky, dark over the sea, we notice it dapple with green spreading like an approaching wave. The wave flickers, fades, recedes, darkens and reappears until it dances ever so slightly. A streak of faint light spills slowly illuminating the sky with a tender, iridescent glow. The aurora comes alive for us—we watch, our eyes fixated. ●

The waters around Húsavík (bottom) **are a fertile home for humpback and sperm whales; Icelandic horses** (right) **are descendants of ponies first brought here by Norse settlers in the ninth century.** Facing page: **Unexpected furry guests** (left) **often greet drivers on Ring Road; Diamond Beach** (right)**, is a glacial outwash plain in southeast Iceland and a big draw for tourists.**

HORSTGERLACH/ISTOCK UNRELEASED/GETTY IMAGES (BOAT), ROM/IMAGEBROKER/GETTY IMAGES (HORSES)

ESSENTIALS

All flights between Delhi and Mumbai and Reykjavik require at least one layover at a European gateway city such as Amsterdam, Frankfurt, or Paris.

Indian travellers need a tourist visa to visit Iceland. Applications for the Schengen visa can be made online through VFS *(dk.vfsglobal.co.in)* and relevant documents (list on website) must be handed in at the visa application centre in person. The 3-month tourist visa costs ₹4,680 (plus ₹780 service fee), and takes about 15 working days to process.

CAMPING The best time to camp in Iceland is Jun-Sept. Temperatures in June through August hover at 15-20°C, whereas night temperatures in September can dip to 5°C. September is usually the start of the Aurora season too, though there are no guarantees; weather is pretty unpredictable across seasons here.

Campsites are easily found in almost all towns and national parks, and most are equipped with toilets, showers, a tiny kitchen (though not everywhere), and washing facilities. Summers are busy and it's advisable to book ahead. Charges per person per night vary between €11-20/₹850-₹1540. At national parks, pay for designated areas at the visitors' centre (sites are usually equipped with toilets, showers, and eating areas).

Camping essentials include tent, stove (can be rented, or bought from supermarkets), cooking utensils and cutlery, shower shoes, car charger, solar powered battery charger and a head lamp. Food is pretty expensive in Iceland, so draw up a menu that's easy to cook, or stock up on sandwiches.

If you're camping in the open, hire an SUV *(www.bluecarrental.is is a good option; from ISK51,606/₹28,475 for a small, automatic car for 10 days, including insurance, minus petrol).*

ELEMENTARY, DEAR FIJI

BY
SOHINI DAS GUPTA

FIJI

Coral Coast's greens and blues race your Eco Trax pushbikes, as they jangle along an abandoned sugarcane railway.

Four elements of nature steer a writer's adventures around Viti Levu island's Sigatoka region

WATER

I am on all fours, dragging my knees through water the colour of troubled thoughts. Inside Naihehe caves—a grin knifing open the garden-sweet rainforests on Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu—it is important to watch your step. Especially if you were a woman of the Navosa tribe in 19th century Fiji, quips my guide Bella.

Bella is chatty, and on the morning of my excursion, puckering her painted red lips. The kind of swinging presence you'd feel safe following into a cave with a cannibal history. Hands on hips, surveying my gecko-crawl through a particularly narrow chasm, she tells me about the 'pregnancy gap.' Back in the day, when the cave was a tribal fortress, women had to squeeze through the be-careful-or-hit-your-head slit to prove that they were not with child. I am not and yet I struggle. Mostly because the water is cold enough to make bones clink like Chardonnay glasses. Naihehe, I am told, can only be entered in good faith, its secrets entrusted to a guardian priest from the nearby Sautabu village. You may approach Fiji's largest cave system, swaddled in the Sigatoka Valley, only after you have shed your foreign gaze. Like most pre-Christian rituals of the land, there is a method to this communion with nature. I have sought permission from the high priest with a *sevusevu* (traditional gift) of kava, my intentions behind the visit translated over ceremonial swigs of the heady drink.

There's only so much your mind can stray in a cave full of tales, narrated in echoes bouncing off sabre-toothed stalagmites and stalactites that drip drip drip. During Fiji's wet season, especially around November, the pathway is flooded. But right now, it is easy to get sucked into stories of Navosa women and children living in the caves as civil warfare threatened the valley tribe. Clutching Bella's hands, I am the flappy, fly-away half of a two-woman paper chain, moving sideways into the main chamber that opens up to reveal astonishing room. We hobble past flowstones that have turned the cave walls into ten-rupee marble cakes, red and brown water squiggles visible through the dark. And right there, Bella points out, is the lone 'secret passage' residents used to clamber up and out. "To hunt for yams and tapiocas, ya know?" Strategic formations lent themselves to different purposes of tribal life; separate hollows, identified as warrior's chamber and the chief's swimming cove, the latter sacred and still off limits. Unless you'd rather meet the fate of "the man who went swimming and came back blind." But nothing holds my attention like the cannibal oven, used to cook, well, what cannibals cook.

"Head and heart for the chief, for wisdom; arms and legs for the warriors, for strength; stomach and back for the women, for fertility," Bella explains.

Off-roading back to Sautabu on a big red ATV, I wait for the water on my skin to dissolve like the wind in my hair. Bella stops to pick up a white lily off the forest floor, also overrun with ginger and rosemallow blooms. "Tuck it behind your right ear if you taken; behind the left if you single." My embarrassed silence, haunted by cicadas' chirping, receives a quick fix. "Both ears then, if it is so complicated." There it is, that full-throated laughter you can follow safely into caves. Now almost dry, I join in. *(offroadfiji.com/safaris.)*

An ATV is your best bet to off-road through forests and villages leading to Naihehe caves.

Sigatoka Sandunes National Park is all sand dune, seashore and fruit-bat-framed forest.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SOHINI DAS GUPTA

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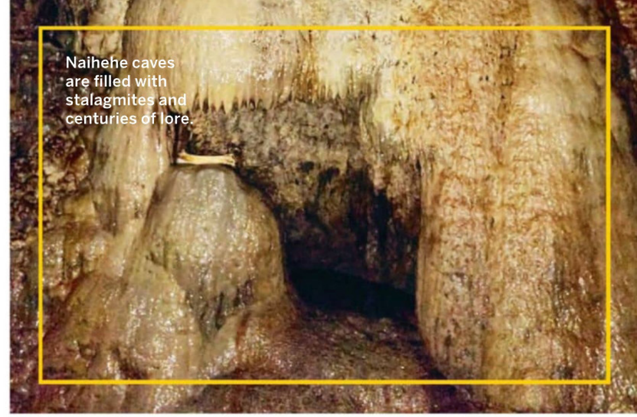
AIR

Jay-Z speaks longingly of his hometown. Not New York, but the Mamanuca islands, a part of the Fijian archipelago off the western coast of Viti Levu. My tandem parasailing instructor is no less studly than the rapper, some might argue more. I tell him how my home in the Indian city of Calcutta is annoyingly east of Mumbai, where I work. "Mumbai. Shah Rukh Khan?" For the first time since I've allowed myself to be hoisted up 330 feet in the air—balloon-strung to a white speck boat by a rope and a harness—I laugh.

Perhaps Shah Rukh Khan is appropriate conversation for a parasailing rookie and her instructor, dangling above waves. Below me, the water along Natadola beach is blue as can be, hyphenated by hiccups of mint and violet. "Violet. The water is violet!" I point out the obvious. Jay-Z laughs and says something about ocean algae. If I fail to register, it is because my eyes are peeled onto what looks like a bed of giant silver eels wiggling across the Pacific in a migration spectacle. Really, they are just crests of surf catching the sun's silver, but what's 20 minutes in the sky without some imagination?

Imagination comes with its banes—I cannot stop picturing myself unconscious and hanging limp, saved from a fall, but not humiliation, by the darned harness. "Close eyes, let loose," Jay-Z offers. I obey, slackening the grip on my chute. As if on cue, the wind picks up. But I don't panic this time. Eyes closed, I only see an infinite loop of silver eels wiggling across the ocean. Parasailing, I decide, offers a decent high. In more than one way. *(fiji.intercontinental.com/recreation-golf-breaks-diving-snorkeling/dive-water-sports-in-fiji.)*

WALTER BIBIKOW/DIGITALVISION/GETTY IMAGES (FOREST)


Naihehe caves are filled with stalagmites and centuries of lore.

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EARTH

My throat's dusty, my calves screaming. The sun belching out a mid-March afternoon on the sand dunes isn't much help. But young ranger Ifereimi's knowledge of the 390 acres of peppery, vine-laced Sigatoka Sandunes National Park—established in 1989 and Fiji's first—is persuasive.

"Look at the sand rising and falling. Keep walking for an hour, you will reach the ocean." True to Ifereimi's words, the two-hour trek across the monoliths, brought to life by the erosion of the coastal hinterland over thousands of years, takes me to the Pacific coast. Our way to the dancing waves is through grey dunes marked by wooden trail signs. The landscape, adding massive drama at the mouth of the Sigatoka river, refuses to behave like a textbook desert. Instead, it rebels in flares of morning glories, feral pinks here and greens knots there, screw pines splashed across miles and miles of what looks to me like a scrunched up tie-and-dye bedsheet.

But the treasures above earth are nothing compared to those under our feet. "You are standing above human bones and artefacts buried here from the time of the first human arrival in Fiji in 1,100 B.C.," Ifereimi declares. My mind harks back to the specimen of pottery, ceramic shards and pots or bowls from over 2,600 years ago, that I'd seen back at the visitor's centre. When wind blows in the right direction, it lifts the lost years off these archeological treasures still being excavated.

The waves are racking up a din but you'd want in on their noise. Bonfire-sized heaps of driftwood dot the shores leading up to a mahogany forest planted in the 1960s to stem the dune's erosion. This finger-snap shift in landscapes takes away some of the exhaustion, replacing it with the thrill of meeting a Fijian swallow-tail butterfly or a Pacific boa between the trees. We make our way into the forest through screeches that belong in a budget Hollywood horror (fruit bats) and a distinct dip in temperature. At a clearing, I stop and commit to memory the image of sun sliding off a tree-slung spider web. We have reached the close of our trail.

I thank my guide and ask him the meaning of his sing-song name. "It is word in ancestral tongue, I don't know meaning," Ifereimi shrugs. "But it is old, very old. Like the dunes." *(www.fiji.travel.)*

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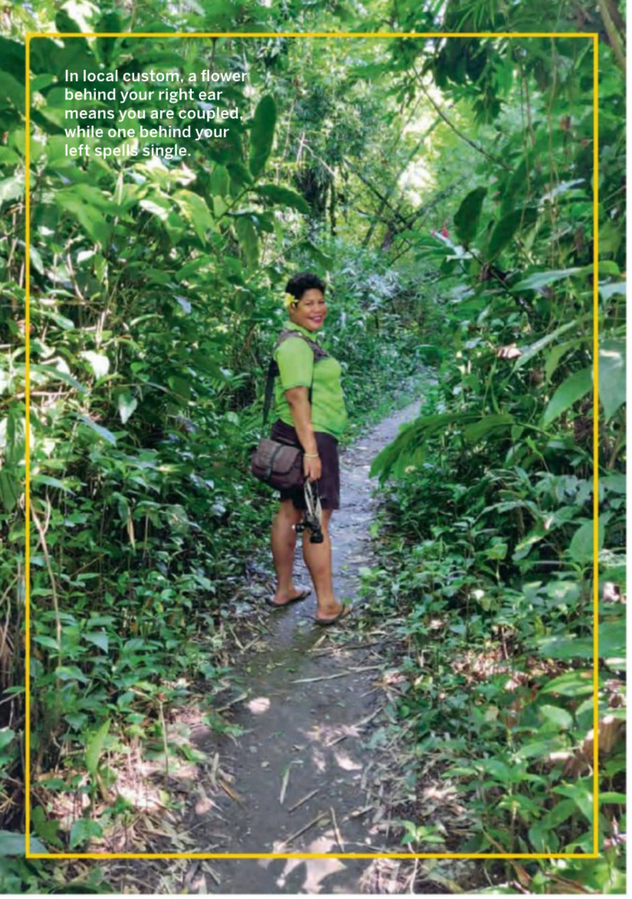
WILD

"Don't worry about derailing. But when you come to the bridge,



In local custom, a flower behind your right ear means you are coupled, while one behind your left spells single.

Pistachio and periwinkle, parasailing above the Natadola beach is an exercise in identifying the hues of land and ocean.

remember to—" "Decelerate," I parrot under my breath as Mandy Heron watches over. We are on the Coral Coast, which stretches between Sigatoka and Suva in southern Viti Levu. If wilderness is essential to Fiji, in Sigatoka it is the fourth element. And a teaser ride on "the world's first" rail-mounted, electric-assisted pushbikes, jouncing along 12 kilometres of abandoned sugarcane railway, promises a lot of wild.

The actual three-hour tour of the tandem buggies is booked-out for the day. Mine is a shorter demo cruise, courtesy Mandy, wife and business partner of Eco Trax inventor Howie de Vries. The Kiwi couple—green crusaders and train geeks by admission—took this rusty piece of Fijian history and turned it into a revamped velocipede ride in 2017. Mandy, seated beside me at the very grungy, garagesque safety briefing 'shed,' tells me about the way ahead. That we are plonked on old airplane seats used on the sets of American series *Wrecked* should be thrilling enough. Throw in an impending brush with jangling river bridges; rainforests laundered by recent drizzles; salted rockfaces; goats, horses and mongoose running wild. On the extended (90 minute) route, the shuffle would include milky coasts, hill fortresses, mangrove foliage, high-fives on the go (when children from passing villages greet you with big bright 'bulas,' you're expected to 'bula' right back), and even a tropical beach picnic. But time is of essence.

Having said that, on a run across beaches and vine flower tunnels—Mandy calls it the 'Tunnel of Love'—time is as easily immaterial. Hair whipped around by the wind, palm on the accelerator button by my handlebar, I' m sure I can fly. A storm of sights and sounds surround me. Crashing waves, rails that rattle like *dida's* ill-fitting dentures, golden leaves drizzling from boughs overhead. At almost 40 kilometres an hour (stick to 20, kids), they register as a mix tape sweetening the motion picture of my flight. "The bridge, the bridge. Slow down!" an Eco Trax crew member hollers me back to reality.

Accelerate. Pedal if you please. Decelerate. The family-friendly push biking is no rocket science. But in this faraway nook of the world, it feels extraordinary. Like a faint dream rushing back to mind. *(www.ecotrax.com.fj.)* ●

ESSENTIALS

There are no direct flights from India to Fiji. Flights from Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru to the gateway city of Nadi on the archipelago's Viti Levu island include one or more layovers at Southeast Asian cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong, or stops in Melbourne, Brisbane or Auckland. It is a one-hour drive from Nadi to Sigatoka via the hibiscus-and-frangipani-frilled Queens Road.

THE JOURNEY

WESTEND61/GETTY IMAGES

88

LIFE IN PINK AND OTHER COLOURS

Drunk on Hemingway, modern art and Woody Allen, an artist goes nosing around yesterday's art havens in Paris

82 CHINESE NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS IN KOLKATA • 98 SEATTLE INTERRUPTED
104 THE SECRET LIFE ON THE GALÁPAGOS

A DANCE OF LIONS AND DRAGONS

Dragon floats parade through the streets. Tiretti Bazaar and Tangra—Kolkata's twin Chinatowns with predominant Chinese settlements—reverberate with fireworks. The mood is set to ring in the Chinese New Year. Celebrated with great pomp and pride worldwide, it is an affair to remember here too. This year, February 5 marks the start of the new lunar calendar and the Year of the Pig. A photographer chronicles both the festivities and behind-the-scenes action in the city

BY POOJA NAIK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANA PANDEY

Lion dancers perform *cai qing*, which translates to "plucking the greens." During the performance, the masked beast strives to snatch lettuce leaves, along with red envelopes hung outside homes and shops. Spitting out the leaves, the animal keeps the money while offering blessings in return.

All occupants of Tiretti Bazaar, home to the boisterous celebrations, are drawn in by the music. From the window of their home, Sakila Begum and her grandsons (top) watch the centuries-old lion dance; Ully Tannery (bottom) in Tangra—founded by Yapfun Young, a Chinese man who wandered to India during WWI—is decked in tints of red, an auspicious colour believed to ward off evil.

Families gather to offer their prayers at Fo Guang Shan Calcutta Buddhist Centre (top), a 1998-established Buddha temple run by a Taiwan-based organisation in the heart of Tangra; Preparations start a few days ahead of the revelry. Visitors throng the streets of Tiretti Bazaar (bottom) to bite into plates of delicacies such as dumplings, pork buns, mutton chops and fish bowl soup.

Lion dancers train a few days ahead of the festival. tANGRA .inc, a Kolkata-based troupe of about 50 members of Chinese descent are among other groups of performers who partake in the jamboree.

Life in Pink and other Colours

Drunk on Hemingway, modern art and Woody Allen, an artist goes nosing around yesterday's art havens in Paris

SERGI SHAGULASHVILI
FACING PAGE: BRUNO DE HOGUES/STOCKBYTE/GETTY IMAGES

By Shaikh Ayaz

In Paris, people-watching at street side cafés is an art in itself. Facing Page: **Russian artist Zurab Tsereteli paints his love for Paris on canvas, in his signature style.**

People sit in street side cafés as though facing

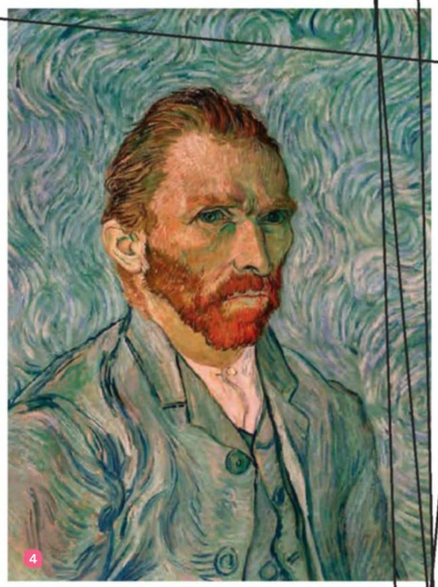
a giant cinema screen. I pass coffee shops and brasseries, a recurring reminder of textbook Parisian quaintness in a city now fraught with the *gilet jaunes* protests. I am on my way to 25 Rue Benjamin Franklin—artist Zurab Tsereteli's studio.

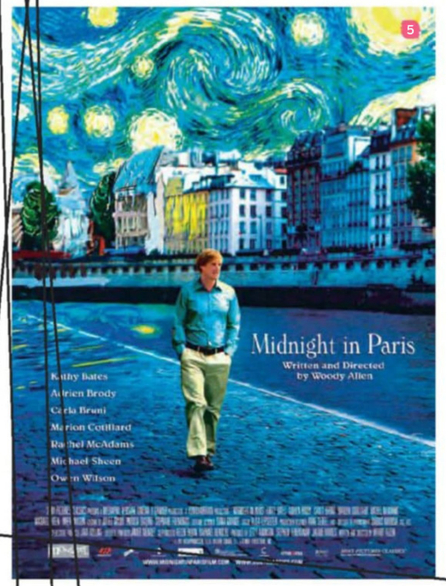
He's already waiting for me, calm face belying both his creative anarchy and the political turmoil on the chestnut *arbre*-lined boulevards. The high-ceiling studio offers an unobstructed view of the Eiffel Tower—so close you'd think you could lean out of the window and kiss it. The Georgia-born, Moscow-based artist, I notice, is wearing a red apron with the Eiffel emblazoned on it. It makes sense that the artist would allow himself this playful declaration of love for the city he's chosen to paint in. And he paints here often. "These works are proof," the 85-year-old says through a translator, pointing to a room full of his kaleidoscopic art. To walk around, you have to make space by moving the canvasses. Even if you manage to make your way, chances are you'd land on a forgotten dab of colour somewhere. When you finally walk out of Zurab's studio, on to the streets with pigments sticking to your shoe, you are quite literally 'painting the town red.'

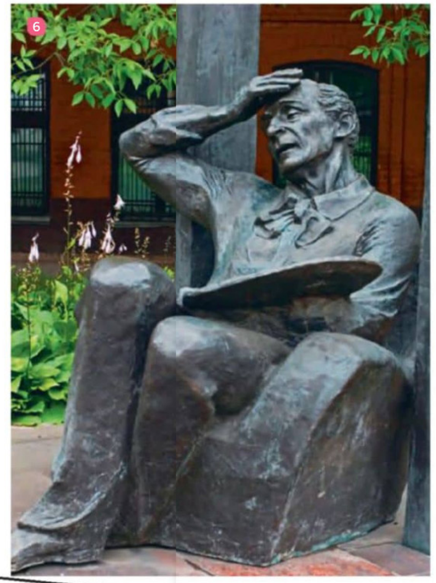
The phrase launches him into a nostalgic trance, as he calls Paris a "moveable feast"—a symbol of freedom and coming-of-age romance. Set in 1920s Paris, Ernest Hemingway's book by the same name later became an inspiration for Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011). A regular at Gertrude Stein's salon on 27 Rue de Fleurus, Hemingway says, "There is never any ending to Paris and the memory of each person who has lived in it differs from that of any other."

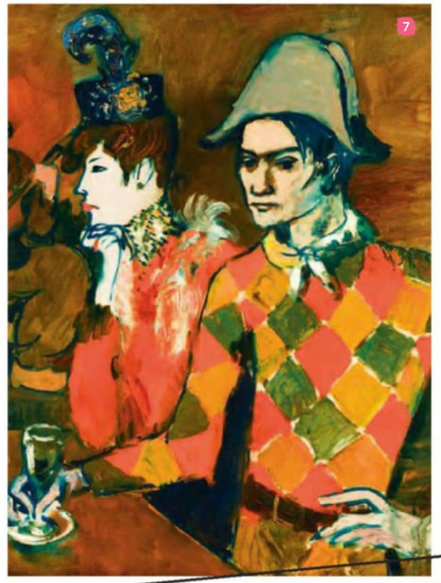
In the 1920s, Hemingway was a nobody, and Picasso, already on his way to greatness. Mary Pickford was America's Sweetheart. In a war-driven Europe, the Treaty of Versailles had brought an end to WWI. "For those who grew up in Soviet Union, Paris was both history and mystery. Something knowable and unattainable," Zurab says.

The artist's first brush with Paris was in the 1960s. His wife Inessa Andronikashvili's close relative, he recalls, occupied a high-ranking post in President Charles de Gaulle's administration. Under Soviet's strict rule, only one of them could travel. So Zurab did. Arriving in 1964, he took up residence with fellow Georgian-Russian artists in Montparnasse. After Montmartre, Montparnasse had emerged as a hub for struggling artists, drawn to cheaper rents, affordable cafés and a bohemian lifestyle. Still new to the city, a brush with idol Marc Chagall changed his life.









1 Renoir's turf is now Musée de Montmartre; **2** Edgar Degas believed his art was 'realist'; **3** Gertrude Stein's salon hosted luminaries; **4** Paris had influenced van Gogh's art deeply; **5** *Midnight in Paris* best portrays the city's 'Golden Age'; **6** Chagall lived in La Ruche from 1911-1914; **7** Picasso's "Au Lapin Agle" is a 1905 self-portrait; **8** Audrey Hepburn embodies chic French charm in *Sabrina*.

"A glimpse of his palette was like seeing a fragment of his soul," says Zurab, whose own poetic Paris-based series, like "Paris: The Seventeenth of September" (2007) and "In Memory of Vava" (2009) are reminiscent of Chagall's dreamscapes.

Vitebsk-born Marc Chagall lived in La Ruche (The Beehive, 2 Passage de Dantzig), Montparnasse from 1911 to 1914. He returned to Paris in later years on a commission from Paris Opera. "In La Ruche, you died or came out famous," Chagall once said. A rundown cluster of ateliers where Chagall, nicknamed 'Poet,' and a band of misfits like Fernand Léger and Chaïm Soutine were busy pioneering modern art by day and getting hammered in cafés like La Coupole (102 Boulevard du Montparnasse) by night. Elsewhere, the red-canopied Café de la Rotonde (105 Boulevard du Montparnasse) was a popular haunt of Pablo Picasso and rival Modigliani. In one of these cafés Modigliani is rumoured to have mocked the great cubist, saying, "Pablo, how do you make love to a cube?" The sidewalk café of La Dôme (108 Boulevard du Montparnasse), once a meeting place for booze-addled intellectuals and poets, is a short distance away. Today, the décor still has a 1920s hangover, but much else has changed. Nearby, Dingo Bar (10 rue Delambre), immortalised in *A Moveable Feast*, has been replaced by an Italian restaurant.

Sometimes called the School of Paris, La Ruche slid into decline after WWII and would have been razed down in the 1960s, if not for timely intervention by giants like Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Renoir. The Golden Age may have long passed but circa 2019, wandering around present-day Montparnasse, you still can't escape the feeling that you could run into vestiges of the glory days any minute. This kind of daydreaming would belong in Woody Allen's retro fantasy *Midnight in Paris*, where a classic Peugeot pulls up to transport protagonist Gil Pender (Owen Wilson) to the roaring Twenties. Of course, Pender's time travel takes place in Montmartre, in the magical midnight hour. Sun-kissed or neon-lit, Montmartre, I realise, is a year-round Mardi Gras, serving green fairy on tap to nostalgia-pilgrims like the goggle-eyed Pender. And me.

Back in the day, when Allen's favourite filmmakers were churning out fast-talking comedies, Hollywood had invented its own version of Paris. Ernst Lubitsch of *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) fame had fashioned a career out of Parisian movies without actually going to Paris. "There is Paramount Paris and Metro Paris and of course, the real Paris. Paramount's is the most Parisian of all," he had boasted. Audrey Hepburn, the star of Wilder's *Love in the Afternoon* and *Sabrina*, embodied the chic and gamine French charm, one Givenchy at a time. In Gene Kelly's *An American in Paris*, it is the image of rain-soaked Paris that is evoked. On one square in Montmartre, I can see ghosts of the stylish gambler Bob from *Bob le flambeur* (1956) and bars and cafés like Pile ou Face and Le Carpeaux that he patronised. Does Amélie (Audrey Tautou) still work at the corner bistro, casting her waif-like spells on strangers?

Having got off at the Pigalle metro stop, I can feel the top-tier village's 'bygone' charm even a century later. Montmartre is of yore and of your. But the Montmartre that has always piqued *my* curiosity was the booming hub of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, in its *fin de siècle* heyday. The artistic invasion to this hillside settlement with spectacular views of the Parisian skyline goes back to the reign of Louis VI. But the arrival of Impressionists, from 1880s onwards, made Montmartre the epicentre of art. In 1886, it was here in the now-defunct Café Guerbois, on 11 Avenue de Clichy, that a group of disruptors—presided over by Édouard Manet—conspired to topple the ruling art regime. Today, the street is abuzz with shoppers, as the café has turned into a line-up of sports and sim-card stores. The only visitor from the past is the sign 'Maison Fondee en 1830' peeping out of the first floor.

In its fledgling days, few knew that the Impressionists would end up cutting a deep impression. Claude Monet's painting "Impression, Sunrise" that inspired the coinage was singled out for special opprobrium. "Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape," noted critic Louis Leroy. Emphasising on *en plein air*, the Impressionists were devoted to nature and the changing conditions of light. Édouard Manet was the leader of Batignolles group and a typical Paris boy. He was the father of modern art, Jean-Christophe Castelain, director of *Le Journal des Arts*, tells me over coffee. "Today, we look at the black woman with flowers in 'Olympia' or 'Luncheon on the Grass' with a nude woman confronting the viewer as two gentleman enjoy a picnic as normal, but in Manet's time it was revolutionary," Castelain says. Besides Édouard Manet, Cafe Guerbois was a favourite hangout of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Gustave Caillebotte. The café doesn't exist anymore but you can make an excursion to 12 Rue Corot where Renoir's turf has been converted into Musée de Montmartre. The landscaped garden of his home was renovated using Renoir's paintings of the time. Right here in this *jardin*, not far from the Sacré-Coeur, Renoir produced the "Dance at Le moulin de la Galette" and "The Swing," two touchstones of Impressionism. From here, start on a half-hour leisurely walk to Montmartre Cemetery, the grave of Edgar Degas. Though Degas resisted the 'Impressionist' tag, preferring to be called a 'Realist,' he retains poetic associations with the group. A Paris native, he lived most of his life in the City of Lights, a large part of it in Montmartre. The painter of elegant ballets and race horses lost his eyesight in dotage, much like his contemporary Monet. Reclusive and depressed, he was forced out of his Montmartre studio in 1912 and spent his last days walking the bustling city he lived in and loved.

On the way to the cemetery, I had stopped by at Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's home-cum-studio on 5 Rue Tourlaque. Moulin Rouge, Lautrec's favourite stomping ground, lies within earshot. Art world's most notorious hell-raiser, Lautrec was the life of the Belle Époque moment in Montmartre, especially the Moulin Rouge. Here, at last, in this decadent free market of love, Lautrec found his muse. The cabarets, dance girls, boisterous nightlife, the humanity and artificiality, Lautrec captured the theatrics of life in the Moulin

Art world's notorious hell-raiser Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec found his muse in the 'decadent market of love'—Moulin Rouge (bottom). **His portrayal** (top) **of the theatrics there are considered unrivalled.**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: HERITAGE IMAGE PARTNERSHIP LTD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/INDIAPICTURE (RENOIR), PETER BARRITT/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (GIRLS), WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE/INDIAPICTURE (GERTRUDE STEIN), ALBUM ONLINE/INDIAPICTURE (VAN GOGH), PHOTO 12/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (POSTER), NINA LEX/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (STONE STATUE), ART LIBRARY/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (PICASSO), THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE/THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (AUDREY HEPBURN)

WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE/IGETTY IMAGES (PAINTING), POLUDZIBER/ISTOCK EDITORIAL/INDIAPICTURE (MOULIN ROUGE)

Paris is an art-lover's delight—its storied lanes have been home to many greats, and walking here feels like being inside a painting.

Back in the day, when Allen's favourite filmmakers were churning out fast-talking comedies, Hollywood had invented its own version of Paris

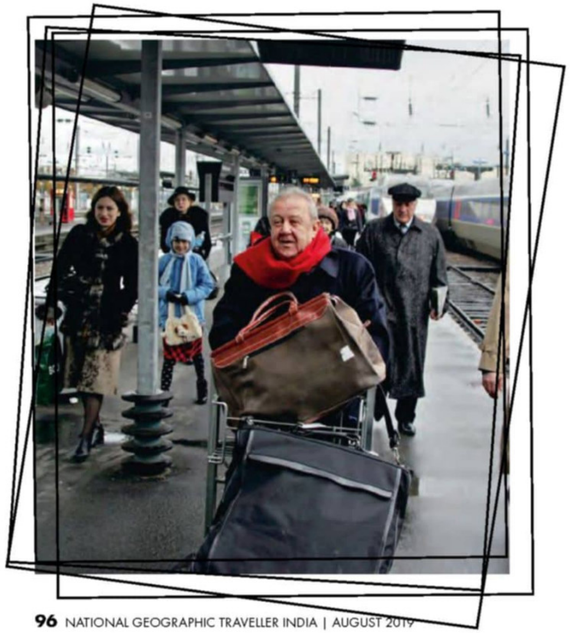
SPOOH/E+/GETTY IMAGES

Rouge (Red Mill). This year marks its 130th anniversary. "I had heard about Lautrec and Jane Avril (legendary cabaret girl who posed for Lautrec) even before I joined Moulin Rouge," says Russia-born Vlada Krassilnikova, who worked as a principal dancer at Moulin Rouge from 1994-2004. Unlike Zurab, she could travel to Paris only after the collapse of Soviet Union. Krassilnikova says the artistic heritage of Montmartre and Moulin Rouge is still alive thanks to the enduring interest in Lautrec, Picasso and other great modernists. "Let's also take a moment to thank Hollywood," she laughs, invoking the 2001 Nicole Kidman hit. Around the corner from the Moulin Rouge, past the Café des 2 Moulins (Audrey Tautou's Amelie waited tables here), lived Theo van Gogh on 54 Rue Lepic, at the foot of Montmartre hill. A plaque on the apartment is dedicated to this memory. Employed with art dealers Goupil&Cie, Theo stayed on 25 Rue Laval (now Rue Victor Massé) for a while, but moved to a larger apartment on 54 Rue Lepic to accommodate his brother Vincent who arrived from Antwerp in 1886 and needed a studio to work in. He quickly struck a close rapport with the *enfant terrible* Lautrec. Lautrec's pastel portrait of van Gogh is a reminder of their absinthe-soaked friendship. Lonely most of his adult life and haunted by mental illness in his final years, van Gogh shared tumultuous relationships with fellow artists. To have van Gogh as your BFF is not a sound idea, unless you don't mind receiving a severed ear as a gift. Cue: He cut off his left ear after a stand-off with Paul Gauguin in Arles. "What am I in the eyes of most people—a nonentity, an unpleasant person," the tortured genius wrote in a letter to Theo in 1882. "Through my work I'd like to show what there is in the heart of such an oddity, such a nobody."

Van Gogh spent only two years in Paris but the works executed here are important enough to be considered a separate chapter in his short life. He completed almost 230 paintings, and his stay in Paris had a huge impact on his style. It was here that his dark Dutch palette slowly turned lighter, making him the van Gogh that mass culture knows today. Interestingly, Montmartre and its architecture didn't inspire him much. Instead, the nature-worshipping, Jean-François Millet-loving van Gogh's approach to Paris was to limn its gardens, flowers and vegetations around Montmartre, closely resembling the subject matter of the Impressionists. "You were an Impressionist from the day you picked up a pencil in the Borinage," Theo tells van Gogh in Irving Stone's *Lust For Life*, a fictional account of van Gogh's life.

Like van Gogh, Pablo Picasso too was a young, starry-eyed expat when he arrived in Montmartre in October 1900. The squalid quarters of Bateau-Lavoir on 13 Rue Ravignan that Picasso called home was an enclave of both creativity and poverty. Today billed as the birthplace of modern art, it was in this shabby splendour, a den of debauchery and freedom, that Picasso painted the "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," arguably the cornerstone of cubism. Close by, the infamous Le Lapin Agile was a gathering place for Picasso, Modigliani and poet Apollinaire—a perfect spot to bat away the blues. The 1905 self-portrait "Au Lapin Agile" was commissioned by Le Lapin Agile's owner Frédéric Gérard and it depicts Picasso dressed as a Harlequin alongside his then-lover. One afternoon, I show up at the Le Lapin Agile. But it's shut. "Come back at 9 p.m.," someone says. I don't, but resolve to some other time.

Tsereteli has been painting in Paris since the 1960s. Facing page: **Palais Garnier's ceiling was painted by Chagall** (top); **Moulin de la Galette** (bottom) **can be seen in van Gogh and Renoir's paintings.**



"Once upon a time in Paris, if you threw something out of the window, it was said to land on an artist," jokes my dinner companion, the India-born, Paris-based artist V. Viswanadhan, popular as 'Paris' Viswanadhan. Today, he chuckles, "It will land on a tourist." Montmartre, like much else in Paris, is now overrun by selfie-hunters. In the 19th century, artists were attracted by Montmartre's affordable lodgings. Today, most have fled to the suburbs because the area is beyond their reach. From disreputable outpost to proud bourgeois address, its evolution is complete.

Explaining the shift in axis—where Paris has all but surrendered its global art capital preeminence—art expert Sixtine Crutchfield-Tripet says, "A lot has happened since Renoir's "Moulin de la Galette." Art has become democratic. Recently, anonymous flyposting artist JR displayed a photographic installation on the Louvre Pyramid Square to support the *gilet jaunes* demonstrators." Crutchfield-Tripet, who first came to Paris as an exchange student at Sorbonne, says the city at first looks rosy but "can be tortured and sombre at times." Tortured, sombre, creative, free? Did those attributes make Paris so popular with artists in the first place? "It was a very open city," he muses. "At the beginning of 20th century in Europe, cities like London, Berlin and Rome were closed societies. Paris gave expats like Picasso and Chagall a taste of freedom."

"As you know," Castelain smiles, "the story is the same. Some artists flock to a city, go to bars and cafés, make friends. And over time, their life and time becomes a legend."

Touché!

SERGI SHAGULASHVILI
FACING PAGE: GAUTIER STEPHANE/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (CEILING); BRUNO DE HOGUES/STOCKBYTE (STREET)

An Amazon Go customer happily leaves the store without the need to checkout.

SHACHIMA/SHUTTERSTOCK

City. Interrupted

Shocked by the dramatic makeover of his favourite American city, **Nitin Chaudhary** explores the streets of Seattle, wondering how this tech-led transformation will affect residents and travellers

A city brimming with high-paid, well-educated people seems like a great place to visit. However, the once-sleepy Seattle I used to frequent appears to have changed for the worse—and, at first glance, it looks like it's because the city is plagued by too much success.

The flywheel of this tech-town is powered by global heavyweights, Amazon and Microsoft, not to mention over a thousand other startups that now call Seattle home. I saw their increased influence on the appearance and workings of the city the last time I visited, two years ago, but I certainly was not prepared for what I saw when I returned to the city centre in 2019.

Seattle still maintains quite a bit of its charm, but half the time I turned a corner downtown, it looked like the city was undergoing surgery, wretched with all the construction going on in its heart—a building frenzy of blocked lanes and closed sideways. Cranes stood perched at almost every corner, and the innards of downtown Seattle lay dug up in the open. Okay, I may be exaggerating slightly, but I blame that on the shock.

Even though I was struggling to come to terms with how much the cityscape had changed, I figured I was there to explore, so I might as well get to know this Seattle that seemed to be caught in the middle of a makeover. It became immediately apparent that the best way to get around was walking, my usual approach to exploring cities. Given the streets were choked with construction and traffic, I could definitely see travellers who like to rent cars or take Ubers struggling with the city's current commuter predicament.

As I popped in and out of cafés and shops, traipsing along city blocks for miles, I began to notice that homelessness had become an unavoidable part of Seattle's landscape. The presence of people living on the streets was as apparent as Seattle's iconic Space Needle. I just had to take a look at my surroundings to understand why. The increased expansion of downtown companies, combined with the influx of employees earning over the city's median income, mean that people are inevitably getting pushed out. "The housing market and rent have skyrocketed in the past four to five years. This has priced a lot of people out of the market," said Linishya, a good friend and local, when I asked her about the increase in Seattle's homeless. The addition of skilled workers to a city is typically a good thing, but in this case, the fast pace of rising rent has also come at a high cost to the city administration and the people unable to keep up with the staggering price of living.

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In Seattle, my mornings typically began with a 6 a.m. caffeine kick at Bulletproof Coffee, a café eponymously named after a concoction of black coffee, blended with ghee (clarified butter) and coconut oil (or its derivative, MCT oil). It's touted to speed up ketosis and hence weight loss, a recipe derived from yak butter tea, commonly consumed in India's Ladakh region. The brain behind the concept is Dave Asprey, who has written several books promoting the bulletproof lifestyle, which has a lot to do with biohacking. This type of hacking (finding new and creative ways to do things) is explained on Asprey's blog as following, "the desire to be the absolute best version of ourselves."

As I sipped on my healthy-hacker coffee at the minimalist café, looking at the early morning crowd of office goers walk past, their ears wrapped in wireless speakers and hands cupped around coffee upgraded with grass-fed collagen protein, I often pondered if the city's newcomers desired the best version of Seattle. Sure, the droves of tech workers heading to open layout offices were contemplating another feature or app that would make our lives a tad simpler and nudge us to shop a little bit more, but were they thinking about a way to keep the spirit of their new home intact? What was the point of aligning one's chakras in a city rapidly losing its soul?

After coffee, I usually would walk to Whole Foods to shop for breakfast, or to simply check out its aisles, stocked with a plethora of organic food and plenty of vegetarian options. During my trips to the U.S. I make it a point to visit this favourite retail chain of mine, although I hadn't been to one since Amazon acquired Whole Foods for $13.5 billion in 2017. I searched for signs of how that move may have changed my beloved grocery chain, but found no visible Amazon presence in the store except for checkout lines dedicated to Amazon Prime customers. However I did find an aisle dedicated only to sleep supplements, such as melatonin. It came in various forms—drinkable sachets to tablets—and it shared the shelf with chamomile tea, lavender smells, and other sleep aids. To me, this well-stocked shelf suggested a symptom of sleep deprivation that may be affecting the citizens of Seattle. Long work hours are not uncommon in the city, I later learned, and the inability to sleep is fast becoming an epidemic here. In my mind, 'Sleepless in Seattle' acquired a new, grimmer meaning.

While Whole Foods may not have drastically changed under Amazon's leadership, the future of retail was on display just a few blocks away in the South Lake Union district—an Amazon Go store. Only present in three U.S. cities, Seattle is unsurprisingly home to four such concept stores. The Go store uses computer vision, deep learning algorithms, and sensors to automate one's purchase and checkout. What that means is while entering, customers scan their Amazon Go QR code from the app on the reader at the store's entrance. Thereafter the process is seamless, shoppers can pick up any item on display—currently it's a limited assortment of juices, coffee, fruits and prepared meals—and just walk out of the store. The prospect of not waiting in queues at the cashier gave me goosebumps. I was simply blown away by this vision of the future, and so was the group of Chinese tourists who were in the store at the same time as me, taking selfies. Only after I exited the store did it dawn on me, this kind of automation meant no jobs for sales people. As I continued to pass the homeless dotting the city streets, many desperate for work, the orange grocery bag in my hand began to weigh me down. The line between progress and regression is indeed fine-drawn.

Still dazed by the Go stores, I caught up with Nishant, another friend of mine, late that evening. He works at Amazon and promised to walk me through its headquarters, a new addition to the downtown since my last visit. The focal point of the visit were 'The Spheres,' giant glass domes housing tropical plants in a temperature-controlled environment. The Spheres

1 Grunge still lives on in Seattle; **2** For over three years Seattle's skyline has featured by far the most tower cranes in any U.S. city; **3** The Spheres feature over 40, 000 plants from more than 30 countries; **4** Cyclists unwind after the Fremont Solstice Parade, a nude cycle ride that is a staple of the city's counterculture.

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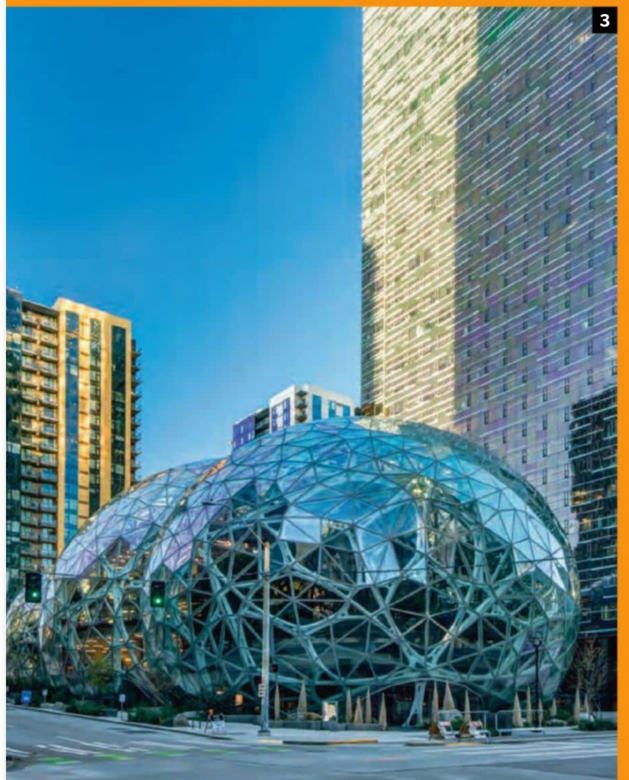

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JED SHARE/KAORU SHARE/GETTY IMAGES (GUITARIST), OKSANAPHOTO/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS/GETTY IMAGES (CITY SKYLINE), ROB TILLEY/CORBIS UNRELEASED/GETTY IMAGES (THE SPHERES), PAUL GORDON/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (CYCLISTS)

are supposed to be a lounge for Amazon employees, but when I visited, these domes were primarily filled with tourists. "It's a gift from Amazon to the city," Nishant explained. "There was lately a lot of criticism that Amazon was taking a lot but not giving back enough." I understood why people felt that way. I was just a tourist and I was already overwhelmed by Amazon's presence in the city. No wonder I kept on hearing locals refer to this phenomenon as, "Amageddon."

The Spheres, whether initially intended as a gift or not, are still a welcome addition, green lungs to the concrete jungle. I got a a visitor's pass and we took a tour of the lounge that housed plants from more than 30 countries, including some insect eating species, all kept at roughly 22 degrees centigrade and 60% humidity. The star is a huge, bulbous plant, nicknamed the 'corpse flower' (*Amorphophallus titanum*). A native to Sumatra, this plant supposedly lets off a rotten flesh-like smell to attract pollinators. While I couldn't smell a thing, I was in awe of the sheer size of the flower, by far the largest I had ever seen.

On our way out, I asked Nishant how he feels the city is reacting to the growing number of techies. "It's a never-ending debate," smiled Nishant, and as if to stress his point, he pulled out his smartphone to show me a music video. "It's of a song called 'Tech Boys' by a local band, The Gods Themselves," he explained. "I think this will tell you better about what the city feels than I can put into words." In the video, propped against a whiteboard, the band members dressed as techies—wearing thick rimmed glasses and goatees—sing, "Desperation! We have an app for that! Humiliation! We have an app for that!" The video ends with the band taking selfies. I was left with a pretty good idea of how the city felt, and wondered why all the blue-badged Amazonians around me didn't tuck those obvious targets into their front shirt pockets.

SEATTLE IS SWARMING WITH SMART BRAINS THAT HAVE CONSTELLATED HERE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, LIKE MOTHS DO AROUND A GLOWING BULB

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Later I decided to head to Redmond, only a 30-minute bus ride from Seattle, but technically another city. "Redmond is Microsoft's home," explained Linishya, who was showing me around, "and there's not any one central building that you'd call Microsoft's head office." We drove around the campus, from one building to another, each nestled deeply in a cover of trees, the area full of greenery, wide uninterrupted streets, and diffused landscape. We parked the car at an office building and walked around. A narrow stream curved right across the campus, and on both banks lay chairs for employees to sit and eat lunch, or even take meetings. I wondered how much thought had gone into designing this campus, and how gently it has merged itself with the surroundings.

That evening—my last of the trip—I sat with Linishya sipping chai at an Indian grocer's. I asked her how she felt about Seattle, and if she fears that it will soon expand to lovely neighbourhoods like Redmond and wolf them down in its insatiable hunger for growth. "Suddenly, there are higher paid, more educated people in Seattle than ever, and the city and suburbs are scrambling to keep up with the rate of growth," she said. But Linishya chose to focus on the positives. "Though the city is spreading, there is an increased opportunity to service new areas that didn't warrant any attention due to lack of density. So you will see a new strip mall come up at a random location, and then you suddenly realise 'Aha! It's there because there is a whole bunch of new neighbours in that area!' I guess in the long run it will just open up more jobs and small businesses, and that's what is most important."

I realised that the pros and cons of Seattle's growth are not that easily discernible to outsiders like me; our takeaways are often subject to who we interact with, and many have differing opinions on the matter. We, as tourists, however, need to watch this debate closely for we are an important ingredient in this mix—the more a city grows, the more we will flock to it, and the more we will demand from it, unknowingly putting strains on its systems and people.

I had collected more questions than I had brought with me on this trip. But that's the point of travel, isn't it? Unanswered questions expand one's thinking. It definitely made me question the status-quo, wondering if things could change for the better.

Seattle is swarming with smart brains that have constellated here from all over the world, like moths do around a glowing bulb. The question is can this creative, entrepreneurial energy be tapped to improving the city holistically, not just for those above the median income? The answer will define the fate of Seattle and those who call it home.

Construction work has integrated itself into Seattle's skyline, which, as of 2019, features 59 cranes.

JULY7TH/E+/GETTY IMAGES

THE SECRET LIFE ON THE GALÁPAGOS

Giant tortoises, curious iguanas, birds with blue feet—following in Charles Darwin's footsteps on a trip to the blissfully isolated islands soothes the soul

BY MADHURI CHOWDHURY

GYDYTOJAS/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

The blue-footed booby is the territory's most recognisable bird. Facing page: **The stone head of Floreana Island was believed to have been created by one of the island's German settlers.**

ELMVILLA/E+/GETTY IMAGES (BOOBIES), MICHAEL SPARROW/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (ILLUSTRATION)

The *Sea Star* is one of the most magnificent boats on the Galápagos seas, the metal counterpart of a blue whale, glistening in the equatorial sunshine. We're greeted on the deck by our captain in a gleaming white uniform. Our ship has eight cabins for 16 people, a fully stocked bar in the lounge, and the two jacuzzis bracketing the spacious sun deck offer panoramic views of fluffy, pastel clouds over the horizon. My favourite corner is a mini library by the dining area on the main deck, filled with books about a young naturalist's discoveries on these islands, including *Voyage of the Beagle*.

Charles Darwin was 22 years old when, in 1831, he embarked on the HMS *Beagle* for a two-year expedition that snowballed into an expansive five-year voyage around the globe. He sailed from England to South America and the Galápagos, before heading back home via Australia and South Africa. Darwin filled notebooks with sketches and observations about the unique wildlife he encountered through the course of his journey. Although in five weeks he visited four islands, his interest in the archipelago's endemic wildlife is what gave birth to his theory of natural selection—that animals adapt to their surroundings in order to survive. The local giant tortoises after which the islands are named caught his attention in particular, and Darwin was fascinated by the way their shells differed slightly, islet to islet. He later also noted how the Galápagos finches' beaks differed depending on which island they were on, and what food was available to the birds.

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Perhaps I had imagined the Galápagos differently, but sailing on the cerulean waters of the Pacific Ocean, hopping on and off the boat, I realised their beauty is more subtle, more quiet. They have a unique position in our world, isolated and with an abundance of endemic fauna, including Darwin's finches, flightless cormorants, and blue-footed boobies; the marketing advantages of the name not lost on tourist stores in San Cristóbal where "I love boobies" shirts sell like hotcakes. When we disembark on Española Island on our second day on the cruise, I see what Darwin saw. His first impressions were made by these barren black rocks. He wasn't impressed, saying, "A broken field of black basaltic lava is everywhere covered by a stunted brushwood, which shows little signs of life." But as we draw nearer, a tail slithers over one of the smoother rocks, and I see the colony of black marine iguanas that was previously camouflaged. They look like miniature statues of Ishiro Honda's original *Godzilla*. Of them, Darwin had this to say: "The rocks on the coast abounded with great black lizards, between three and four feet long; and on the hills, an ugly yellowish-brown species was equally common." This peaceful morning, on Española's secluded white sand beach, they laze blocking our path and show no signs of moving, so we hopscotch around them until we come face-to-face with a handful of bright orange crabs scuttering over a rock where two sea lions are lounging.

Tourists must tread carefully here. "They'll only bite if you step on them," warns Carlos, a young naturalist who grew up on these islands and is our affable guide. Indeed the animals here are the most fearless I've ever seen. The turtles hurtle into humans snorkelling in their waters, a bird may land on your head, and the sea lions comically chase people around on beaches where tourists have been warned not to let them touch you. It's a warped world where the animals are even more fascinated by us than we are by them. Only the giant tortoises I saw on land have any semblance of how we assume animals usually act around humans. They pull their heads back into their shells if you get too close, but tourists still manage to click photos to show how massive they are—some, with their necks extended, are human-sized themselves.

Our week-long cruise allows for plenty of time in the water, much of which we spend snorkelling and kayaking. We take Zodiacs out to Devil's Crown, the remains of an extinct volcano, and fall backwards into the choppy waters that surround the crown-shaped rock structure, named so because only a devil would wear a crown so crude, so craggy. I immediately see the shadow of reef sharks on the surface below, fish of all sizes, like splatters of paint across the murky canvas, and later on there is the rectangular shadow of a hammerhead on the ocean bed. Swimming peacefully with no nowhere to be next, I relish this rare opportunity of getting up close and personal with the island's iridescent inhabitants.

Our journey covers the oldest islands on the eastern side of the archipelago, including Santa Fe, Floreana, San Cristóbal, Española and North Seymour. A few days into the trip, on Santa Fe, I see a yellow-hued marine iguana perched on a boulder next to a sea lion who is sleeping in the shade of a cactus. The animals are set against the backdrop of red shrubs, a clutch of green, prickly pear cacti, and an azure sky. It's the most colour I've seen in these lands so far, and the lack of which even Darwin realised, so much so that he wrote how "the plants

I HAD IMAGINED THE GALÁPAGOS DIFFERENTLY, BUT SAILING ON THE PACIFIC OCEAN, HOPPING ON AND OFF THE BOAT, I REALISED THEIR BEAUTY IS MORE SUBTLE, MORE QUIET

Before penning *On the Origin of Species* (5), Darwin sailed for the Galápagos on the HMS *Beagle* (6), a British Royal Navy vessel. He famously referred to the islands as "a little world within itself." The plenitude of species here, from spiky anemones (1), American flamingos (2) and rare finches (4) to mammoth tortoises (7) and crabs (3), back his observation to this day.

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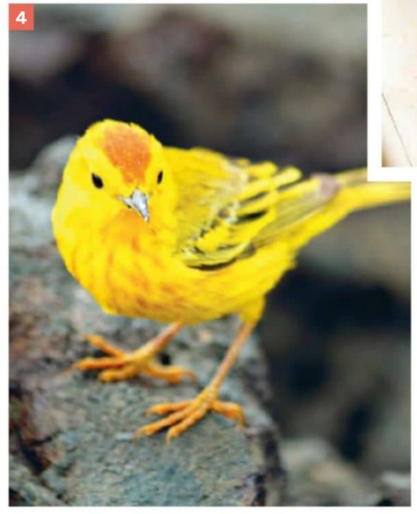

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The coastline of the Galápagos is perfect to spot sea lions, which are indigenous to the island and rarely migrate from here.

MOST VISITORS COME TO THE ISLANDS PRIMARILY TO SEE NATIVE CREATURES IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT

MANTAPHOTO/E+/GETTY IMAGES

here have a wretched, weedy appearance." I did not see one beautiful flower, he had said. Not anymore it seems. Carlos says there are now private gardens outside a few homes in San Cristóbal where residents craving some pop of colour have potted new species, including roses.

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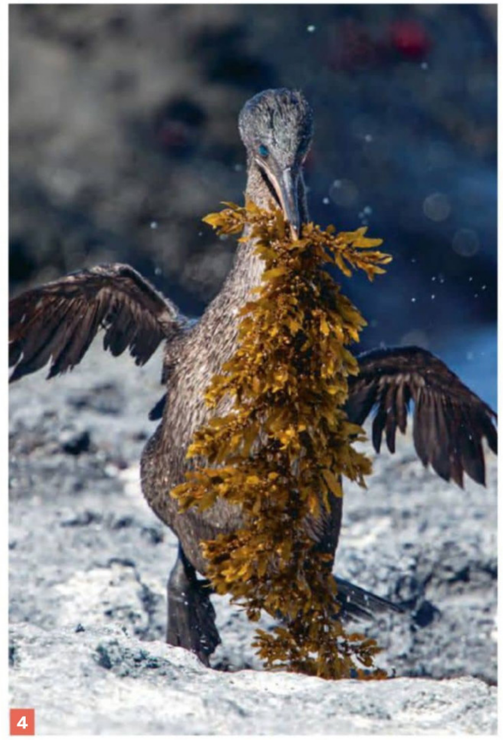
The day before, we had disembarked on Floreana island, where I had seen the first traces of the humans who once lived here. There is a "post office" on Floreana which is essentially a sturdy, old wooden barrel once used by 18th-century whalers. Sailors would leave their mail in the barrel, to be carried home by other sailors passing by. Tourists still use this stamp-less system, a system that allegedly still works. We retrieve a pack of recently written postcards; there are letters to loved ones from countries around the world. Our group of travellers is from India, Australia, England and North America and the Australians gamely pocket postcards to take back, addressed to residents in Sydney.

Although these lands are far flung, they have a long history of human inhabitation and it's as strange and mysterious as you'd expect from isolated places. The islands were first discovered by accident in 1535 when a Panamanian bishop named Fray Tomás de Berlanga was blown off course on his way to Peru. The three centuries that followed this discovery saw the archipelago being used as a base by whalers and pirates who ate a large majority of the island's indigenous tortoises. Almost one lakh tortoises were removed from the islands during this period and the smaller tortoises on Floreana Island were hunted in such large numbers they were thought to be extinct until recently. The larger 200 pound tortoises on the Western Islands were mostly spared because they were harder to sling over the pirate's shoulders. Later, in the 19th century, after Ecuador had already claimed the Galápagos Islands, they were occupied by a succession of Germans.

First to arrive was Dr. Friedrich Ritter and his female companion Dore Strauch, who roamed around in the nude. Ritter had had his teeth preemptively removed because it wasn't like he was going to find any dentist on the secluded island, and Strauch had to have hers yanked out with kitchen tools they had brought along once they started rotting. They wrote letters about their lives on Floreana, and the trusty barrel mailing system saw these letters make their way back to Berlin where a local newspaper published Ritter's exploits, making him famous. Tales of their island life led others to follow in their footsteps, and Ritter and Strauch were soon joined by Heinz Wittmer, his pregnant wife, Margret, and Harry, Heinz's son from his first marriage. They were later joined by a self-proclaimed baroness from Austria who arrived on the islands with two lovers. She was flashy and annoyed Ritter greatly, so when she and Lorenzo, one of her lovers, disappeared from the island, it was assumed that Ritter had something to do with it. Though the baroness' belongings were afterwards discovered in the area the Wittmers' lived in, so no one knows what really went down.

Although they are now heavily protected, the Galápagos are still not fully exempt from human strangeness. I hear stories of infringement, of plundering, most recent being that of a tourist who tried to smuggle out four iguanas, wrapped in clothing, in his hand baggage. Most visitors these days, though, come primarily to see these native creatures in their natural habitat and leave their home untouched, a home whose raw, grey beauty Darwin's thoughtful eye eventually came to appreciate. "The natural history of this archipelago is very remarkable," he conceded in his later writings, "it seems to be a little world within itself; the greater number of its inhabitants, both vegetable and animal, being found nowhere else." The islands are indeed incredible, unlike any other. While I was there I didn't register anything amazing happening. It isn't as dramatic as seeing a lion make a kill in the African bush, or as watching the mist part at the top of Toubkal in the Atlas Mountains. The beauty of these lands creeps up on you slowly: the tranquillity of things, the tiny, grey birds, the barren rocks, all make a lasting impression. I think they're one of the most beautiful places on Earth, but as Darwin said, "after so very short a visit, one's opinion is worth scarcely anything."

The island's unique habitat, which includes exotic species such as the flightless cormorant (4) and marine iguanas (1), alongside untouched forest cover (2), is under threat. Hence there are strict regulations in place for cruise holidays (3) to the islands.



ESSENTIALS

Indians travelling to the Galápagos Islands will need to get a visa upon arrival in Ecuador and then pay the Galápagos National Park entrance fee of $100/₹6,900 per person upon arrival at the archipelago. Flights from Delhi or Mumbai to Quito, Ecuador's capital, usually have a layover in North America (Miami, Atlanta), and in a European hub like Amsterdam. From Quito, there are short flights to San Cristóbal and Baltra in the Galápagos. The writer travelled with Latin Trails, a South American boutique cruise company. The Sea Star cruises start at $4,649/₹3.2 lakhs per person for a five-day/four-night stay.

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TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ

CONSIDERED THE FATHER OF RECREATIONAL CAMPING, WHO WROTE THE FIRST EDITION OF *THE CAMPER'S HANDBOOK* IN 1908?

THIS AMERICAN COUNTY IS THE BIRTHPLACE OF MODERN MOUNTAIN BIKES, AND THEY HAVE A MUSEUM TO PROVE IT.

WITH A DEPTH OF 19,714 FEET, THIS CANYON IS HOME TO A RIVER AND IS THE DEEPEST IN THE WORLD.

WHICH IS NORTHERN IRELAND'S NOTORIOUS BIG WAVE SURF SPOT WHERE WAVES RISE UP TO 30 FEET?

MOUNTAINEERING LEGEND REINHOLD MESSNER DESCRIBED THIS 18,605-FOOT SUMMIT AS "THAT LITTLE HILL THAT DEFEATED ME."

ONCE A WWII BATTLE SITE, THE KOKODA TRAIL IS NOW A TREKKERS' PILGRIMAGE. IN WHICH COUNTRY CAN YOU FIND IT?

ANSWERS **1.** THOMAS HIRAM HOLDING **2.** MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA **3.** YARLUNG ZANGBO, TIBET **4.** MULLAGHMORE, SLIGO
5. MT DAMAVAND IN IRAN **6.** PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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